The Last Ringbearer



Kirill Yeskov



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Translated by Yisroel Markov

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The Last Ringbearer

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FROM THE TRANSLATOR

More than 15 years ago Russian scientist Kirill Yeskov tried to settle certain geographical problems in Tolkien's fantasy world. One thing led to another, and he tackled a bigger project—what if we assumed that it's no less real than our world? His conclusion was that in such a case, the story of the Ring of Power is most likely a much-altered heroic retelling of a major war—but what was that war really about?

The result of this re-appraisal was the publication in 1999 of *The Last Ringbearer*—a re-thinking of Tolkien's story in real-world terms. Dr. Yeskov, a professional paleontologist whose job is reconstructing long-extinct organisms and their way of life from fossil remnants, performs essentially the same feat in *The Last Ring-bearer*, reconstructing the real world of Tolkien's Arda from *The Lord of the Rings*—the heroic tales of the Free Men of the West written in that world. We have a pretty good idea how well heroic tales map to reality from our own world . . .

I was impressed enough by this work to spend a few dozen lunch hours translating it to English. Reportedly, some publishing houses have considered a commercial translation of this book, which had been published in several major European languages, but abandoned the idea out of fear of the Tolkien estate, which doesn't countenance any derivative works, especially in English. Witness the history of its relationship with New Line Cinema. This translation is non-commercial.

I have been fortunate to establish communication with the author and have the translation vetted (and much corrected) by him. I now offer this work for your perusal. At 139,000 words, this story is about 80% of the length of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

I have to disappoint the fans of Sauron: His Majesty Sauron the VIII rates only a few mentions in this work, having been nothing more than an enlightened king. Nor does the Ring of Power rate more than a passing mention. Likewise the Hobbits: unlike LOTR, this story is not

about them.

Finally, no attempt has been made to imitate J.R.R. Tolkien's style—it is deliberately modern and down-to-earth.

Yisroel Markov
2010

No indeed! We are not strong,[1]
But we know Peoples that are.
Yes, and we'll guide them along
To smash and destroy you in War!
We shall be slaves just the same?
Yes, we have always been slaves,
But you—you will die of the shame,
And then we shall dance on your graves!
Rudyard Kipling

Never in the field of human conflict[2]
was so much owed by so many
to so few.
Winston Churchill

PART I

Vae Victis [3]

“Gold is for the mistress—[4]
silver for the maid—
Copper for the craftsman cunning at his trade.”
“Good!” said the Baron, sitting in his hall,
“But Iron—Cold Iron—is master of them all.”
Rudyard Kipling

CHAPTER 1

Mordor, Hutel-Hara sands

April 6, 3019 of the Third Age

Is there a sight more beautiful than a desert sunset, when the sun, as if ashamed of its whitish daytime fierceness, lavishes a bounty of unimaginably tender and pure colors on its guests? Especially good are countless shades of purple, which turn dunes into a charmed sea—don't miss those couple of minutes, they will never happen that way again . . . Or the last moment before sunrise, when the first light of dawn interrupts in mid-movement the staid minuet of moon shadows on the lacquered hardtops—for those dances are forever hidden from the uninitiated, those who prefer day to night . . . Or the never-ending tragedy of the hour when the power of darkness begins to wane and the fuzzy clusters of the evening constellations suddenly turn into prickly icy crumbs, which by morning will rime the bronzed gravel of the *hamada*?[5]

It was at such a midnight hour that two men moved like gray shadows along the gravelly inner edge of a sickle-shaped gap between two low dunes, and the distance between them was exactly that prescribed by the Field Manual for such occasions. However, contrary to the rules, the one bearing the largest load was not the rear 'main force' private, but rather the 'forward recon' one, but there were good reasons for that. The one in the rear limped noticeably and was nearly out of strength; his face—narrow and beak-nosed, clearly showing a generous serving of Umbar blood—was covered with a sheen of sticky sweat.

The one in the lead was a typical Orocuen[6] by his looks, short and wide-faced—in other words, the very 'Orc' that mothers of

Westernesse use to scare unruly children; this one advanced in a fast zigzagging pattern, his every movement noiseless, precise and spare, like those of a predator that has scented prey. He had given his cloak of bactrian[7] wool, which always keeps the same temperature—whether in the heat of midday or the pre-dawn chill—to his partner, leaving himself with a captured Elvish cloak, priceless in a forest but utterly useless here in the desert.

But it was not the cold that bothered the Orocuen right now: listening keenly to the silence of the night, he cringed as if with toothache every time he heard the crunch of gravel under the unsure feet of his companion. Sure, to run into an Elvish patrol here, in the middle of the desert, would be almost impossible, and besides, for Elves starlight is not light at all, they need the moon . . . Nevertheless, Sergeant Tzerlag, leader of a scouting platoon of the Cirith Ungol Rangers, never relied on chance in his work, and always tirelessly repeated to new recruits: “Remember this, guys: the Field Manual is a book where every jot and tittle is written with the blood of smartasses who tried to do it their way.” This must have been how he managed to lose only two men during the entire three years of the war, and in his own estimation he was prouder of that than of the Medal of the Eye, which he received last spring from the Commander of the South Army. Even now, home in Mordor, he behaved as if he was still on an extended raid on the Plains of Rohan; although, what kind of home is it now, really?..

A new sound came from behind—something between a moan and a sigh. Tzerlag looked back, estimated the distance, and, dropping his sack such that not a buckle clanged, made it to his companion just in time. The man was slowly sagging, fighting unconsciousness, and passed out the moment that sergeant grabbed him under the arms. Silently cussing, the scout returned to his sack to get the flask. Some partner, dammit . . . useful like a doorstop . . .

“Here, drink some, mister. Feeling worse again?”

The moment the prone man got a couple of swigs down, his whole body convulsed with tortuous gagging.

“Sorry, Sergeant”, he muttered guiltily. “Just wasted water.”

“Don’t worry about it, the underground collector is really close now. What did you call that water then, Field Medic, sir? Some funny word.”

“Adiabatic.”

“You live, you learn. Alright, water’s not our worry. Leg giving out

again?"

"Afraid so. Listen, Sergeant . . . leave me here and make for that nomadic camp of yours—you said it was close, like fifteen miles. Then come back. If we run into Elves, we're both done for. I'm not good for much now . . ."

Tzerlag thought for a while, drawing signs of the Eye in the sand. Then he smoothed out the sand and rose decisively.

"We'll camp under the yonder dune, looks like the ground should be firmer over there. Will you make it there yourself, or will it be easier to carry you?"

"Listen, Sergeant . . ."

"Quiet, doctor! Sorry, but right now you're like a little kid, safer under supervision. Should the Elves catch you, in fifteen minutes they'll know everything: how many in the group, where headed and all that. I value my skin too much for that . . . So—can you walk a hundred fifty paces?"

He trudged where he was told, molten lead rising up his leg with every step. Right under the dune he passed out again, and didn't see how the scout first painstakingly masked the vomit, foot- and body prints, and then dug out a day hideout, quickly as a mole. He regained conscience as the sergeant was carefully leading him to the fabric-lined hole. "Think you'll be better in a couple of days, mister?"

Meanwhile, a disgusting pus-and-blood-colored moon rose over the desert. Now there was enough light to examine the leg. The wound itself was superficial, but it refused to scab over and bled at the slightest touch—the Elvish arrow had been poisoned, as usual. On that horrible day he had used up his entire stock of antidotes on the seriously wounded, hoping for a break. There was none. Tzerlag dug him a hideout under a fallen oak in a forest a few miles north-east of Osgiliath, and for five days he lay there, clutching with his fingernails to the icy windowsill of life. On the sixth day he managed to surface from the purple maelstrom of excruciating pain and listened to the sergeant's tales, drinking bitter Imlad Morgul water, which stank with some unknown chemical (there was no other water in safe reach). The remnants of the South Army, bottled up in Morgul Gorge, had laid down their arms, and the Elves and the Gondorians drove them somewhere beyond the Anduin; a crazed *mûmak* from the defeated Harad battalion had trampled his field hospital, wounded and all, into bloody pulp; looks like there's nothing else to save here, time to make for home, to Mordor.

They got started on the ninth night, as soon as he could walk. The scout chose to use the Cirith Ungol pass, figuring that not even a mouse could make it by the Ithilien highway now. The worst part was that he hadn't figured out his poisoning (some poison expert!): by the symptoms it looked to have been something new, from the most recent Elvish developments. His medicine box was almost empty anyway. On the fourth day the sickness came back at the most inopportune time, right when they were slipping by the freshly built military camp of the Western allies at the foot of Minas Morgul. For three days they had to hide out in the ominous ruins there, and on the third evening the sergeant whispered to him in surprise: "Your hair's going white, mister!" The most likely culprit here was not the mythical undead keepers of the ruins, but the quite real gallows erected by the victors on the side of the road some twenty yards from their hideout. The six corpses in tattered Mordorian uniforms (a large sign informed in fine Elvish runes that these were "war criminals") have attracted the entire raven population of the Mountains of Shadow to a feast, and this sight will probably haunt him to the end of his days.

. . . Tonight's bout was the third. Shaking with fever, he crawled into the fabric-lined hole, and once again thought: how must Tzerlag be doing, in his Elvish rag? Sometime later the scout slipped into the hideout; water gurgled quietly, once, in one of his flasks, then sand dribbled down from the ceiling—the Orocuen was masking the entry hole from the inside.

The moment he rested against that reliable back, cold, pain and fear began to slip away, and a calm certainty that the crisis was over came from somewhere. Now I only need to get some sleep, and I'll stop being a burden to Tzerlag . . . some sleep . . .

"Haladdin![8] Hey, Haladdin!"

Who is that calling me? And how did I come to be in Barad-Dur? All right, let it be Barad-Dur . . .

CHAPTER 2

Fifty miles east from the Orodruin volcano, where the light-minded babbling brooks originating from the snows of the Ash Mountains turn into staid, respectable canals and then subside quietly into the pulsing heat of the Mordor plain, lies the oasis of Gorgoroth. For ages they would gather two annual crops of cotton, rice, dates and grapes here, while the handiwork of local weavers and weapon-makers was prized throughout Middle Earth. Of course, the nomadic Orocuens have always looked with scorn on their tribesmen who chose the life of a farmer or a craftsman: everybody knows that the only occupation worthy of a man is cattle-breeding; that is, if you don't count robbing caravans. This attitude, however, had never prevented them from regularly driving their flocks to the markets of Gorgoroth, where the sweet-talking Umbarian merchants who quickly came to dominate local trade would invariably fleece them. Those crafty fellows, ever ready to risk their heads for a handful of silver, drove their caravans throughout the East, not spurning either slave trade or smuggling, or even plain robbery, when convenient. However, their main source of income had always been the export of rare metals, mined in abundance from the Ash Mountains by the stocky unsmiling Trolls—unequaled miners and smelters, who later monopolized all stonemasonry in the Oasis, too. Life side by side had long trained the sons of all three peoples to eye the neighbors' daughters with more interest than their own, to make fun of each other ("An Orocuen, an Umbarian, and a Troll walk into a bar . . ."), and to defend the Ash Mountain passes and the Morannon against the Western barbarians together.

This, then, was the yeast on which Barad-Dur rose six centuries ago, that amazing city of alchemists and poets, mechanics and astronomers, philosophers and physicians, the heart of the only civilization in Middle Earth to bet on rational knowledge and bravely pitch its barely adolescent technology against ancient magic. The

shining tower of the Barad-Dur citadel rose over the plains of Mordor almost as high as Orodruin like a monument to Man—free Man who had politely but firmly declined the guardianship of the Dwellers on High and started living by his own reason. It was a challenge to the bone-headed aggressive West, which was still picking lice in its log 'castles' to the monotonous chanting of scalds extolling the wonders of never-existing Númenor. It was a challenge to the East, buckling under the load of its own wisdom, where Ying and Yang have long ago consumed each other, producing only the refined static beauty of the Garden of the Thirteen Stones[9]. And it was a challenge to a certain someone else, for the ironic intellectuals of the Mordor Academy, unbeknownst to them, have come right up to the line beyond which the growth of their power promised to become both irreversible and uncontrollable.

. . . And Haladdin was walking the streets he had known since childhood—from the three worn stone steps of his parents' house in the cul-de-sac beyond the Old Observatory, past the plane trees of the King's Boulevard, which ends at the ziggurat with its Hanging Gardens —towards the squat building of the University. It was there that his work had several times granted him a moment of the highest happiness known to man: when you hold like a hatchling in the palm of your hand a Truth so far revealed only to you, and it makes you richer and more magnanimous than all the rulers of the world . . . And a bottle of fizzy Núrnen wine was making rounds to the din of many voices, foam sliding down the sides of mismatched mugs and glasses to the merry oaths of the drinkers, and the entire April night was still ahead, with its unending arguments over science, poetry, cosmology, and science again . . . And Sonya was looking at him with those enormous dry eyes—only the Trollish girls' eyes sometimes have this fleeting shade of color—dark gray? transparent brown?—and making a valiant effort to smile: "Halik, dear, I don't want to be a burden"— and he wanted to cry from the tenderness overflowing his soul.

But the wings of the dream were already carrying him back to the night desert, amazing to any novice with the improbable diversity of its inhabitants, who literally drop through the earth with the first ray of the sun. Tzerlag had told him that this desert, like any other, had been forever divided into plots: every bush, every patch of prickly grass, every spot of edible lichen (*manna*[10]) had its owner. The Orocuen easily named the clans owning the dells through which they were making their way now, and could precisely detect their

boundaries, clearly relying on some clues visible only to him, rather than the little *abo*[11] stone pyramids.

The only property held in common in these parts were the cattle watering holes—large depressions in the sand filled with bitter, salty, but still potable water. Haladdin was most amazed by the *tzandoi*[12] system of adiabatic water collectors, which he had only read about before. He admired the unknown genius who had first figured out that one scourge of the desert—the nightly cold—can overcome the other one—aridness: quickly cooling stones act as condensers, 'squeezing' water out of seemingly dry air.

Of course, the sergeant did not know the word 'adiabatic' (he did not read much, not finding it much use or fun), but some of the collectors they passed were his handiwork. Tzerlag had built his first *tzandoi* when he was five; devastated when it had not a drop of water the next morning, he had figured out the problem himself (the stone pile was too small) and first felt the pride of a Master. Strangely, he felt no inclination to tend cattle and did it only when he had to, whereas it was nearly impossible to drag him away from tackle shops and such. The relatives would shake their heads in disapproval—"just like a towner!"—but his father, observing his constant tinkering, made him learn to read. That was how he got to be a *mantzag*[13]—a traveling craftsman; moving from camp to camp, in two years he could make anything. Once in the Army (nomads were usually assigned either to light cavalry or ranger units), he fought as meticulously as he used to build *tzandois* or put together bactrian tackle.

To be honest, he was sick and tired of the war. Sure, the Throne, the Motherland and all that . . . but the generals kept doing things whose stupidity was obvious even to a sergeant.

One needed no time in a military academy to understand that; the common sense of a craftsman (so he thought) was quite enough. For example, after the rout at Pelennor his scouting company was assigned, among other units that could still fight, to cover the retreat (the headlong flight, rather) of the main forces. His scouts were told to make their stand without long spears in the middle of a plain, and the elite rangers, each with at least two dozen successful missions in enemy territory under his belt, died senselessly under the hoofs of Rohan cavalry, who did not even have time to see who they were trampling.

Tzerlag decided then that nothing could help the generals; to hell

with them and this war!

Enough of this, guys—we shall learn war no more! Thank the One, they had made it out of that damned forest, where you can't even get a bearing in cloudy weather and every scratch begins to rot immediately, so now, home in the desert, we'll be fine. In his dreams the sergeant was already at the familiar Teshgol camp, which was now only one good night's march away. He pictured clearly to himself how he would unhurriedly determine what needs fixing, then they'd be invited to the table, and after the second mug the hostess would casually steer the conversation to the difficulties of maintaining a household without a man around, while the grimy-faced youngsters (there's four of them there, or was it five?) would be circling around and clamoring to touch his weapons . . . The other thought he had while drifting off to sleep was: wouldn't it be nice to find out who the hell wanted this war, and meet him in a dark corner somewhere . . .

No, seriously—who wanted it?

CHAPTER 3

Middle Earth, the arid belt

A natural history brief[14]

Two types of climate epochs follow one another in the history of any world, including Middle Earth—pluvial and arid; the growth and shrinking of polar ice caps follow a single rhythm, which is a sort of a pulse of a planet. Those natural cycles are concealed from the eyes of historians and scalds by the kaleidoscopic variety of peoples and cultures, although it is those very changes that largely create this kaleidoscope. Climate change can play a larger role in the history of a people, or even a civilization, than the deeds of great reformers or a devastating invasion. Well, in Middle Earth the Third Age was drawing to a close together with a pluvial climate epoch. The paths of moisture-laden cyclones kept bending towards the poles, and the trade wind belts, covering the thirties' latitudes in both hemispheres, were rapidly turning to deserts. Not that long before the Mordor plains had been a savannah, while real forests of juniper and cypress covered the slopes of Orodruin; now the desert was relentlessly encroaching upon the dry steppes hugging the foot of the mountain ranges, consuming acre after acre. The snow line in the Ash Mountains kept creeping higher, and the streams feeding the oasis of Gorgoroth more and more resembled a child dying from some unknown disease. Had the local civilization been a bit more primitive and the country poorer, that is how it would have continued; the process would have taken centuries, and something always comes up over such stretches of time. However, Mordor was powerful beyond measure, so the powers-that-be decided not to "seek mercy from nature," but rather to set up an extensive irrigation system, using the tributaries of the Sea of Núrnen.

An explanation is in order here. Irrigation agriculture in arid regions is very productive, but has to be conducted with utmost care. The problem is high salinity of the groundwater; the main challenge is to avoid bringing it up to the surface, God forbid, or it will salt the topsoil.

This is precisely what will happen if your irrigation dumps too much water on the fields and the soil capillaries fill up enough to connect the groundwater to the surface. Capillary forces and surface evaporation will immediately begin pumping that water up to the surface (exactly like oil going up the wick of a lit lamp), and this process is irreversible; in a blink of an eye your field will turn into a lifeless salt pan. The saddest part is that once you screw up, there is no way to push that salt back down.

There are two ways to avoid this calamity. One is to water very sparingly, so that the water in the shallow capillaries does not connect with the groundwater. Another possibility is the so-called flushing cycle, whereby you cause a regular flooding that carries the constantly upwelling salt away to the sea or some other terminal drain. This, however, can only be done in the valleys of large rivers that flood regularly—it is that spring flood that washes away the salt accumulated over the previous year. This is precisely what happens, for example, in Khand, and it was precisely that irrigation model that the inexperienced Mordor engineers have copied in a sincere belief that the quality of irrigation is determined by the number of cubic furlongs of earth moved.

But it is impossible to establish a flushing cycle in the closed basin of Mordor, since there are no rivers flowing through it, and the only terminal drain is the Sea of Núrnen—the very same Núrnen whose tributaries got diverted to irrigate far-flung fields. The negligible elevation difference meant that there was no way to create anything like a flood in those channels, so there was nothing to flush the salt and nowhere to flush it. After a few years of bumper crops the inevitable happened—huge tracts of land were rapidly salted, and all attempts to establish drainage failed due to high groundwater levels. The end result was an enormous waste of resources and massive damage to the country's economy and ecology.

The Umbarian system of minimal irrigation would have suited Mordor just fine (and been a lot cheaper to boot), but this opportunity had been irretrievably lost now. The masterminds of the irrigation project and its executives were sentenced to twenty-five years in lead

mines, but, predictably, that did not help anyone.

This event had been a major setback, but still not a catastrophe. By that time Mordor was deservedly being called the World's Smithy[15], and it could trade its manufactured goods for any amounts of food from Khand and Umbar. Caravans of traders went back and forth through the Ithilien crossroads day and night, and there were more and more voices in Barad-Dur saying that the country has had enough tinkering with agriculture, which was nothing but a net loss anyway, and the way to go was to develop what nobody else had—namely, metallurgy and chemistry. Indeed, the industrial revolution was well underway: steam engines toiled away in mines and factories, while the early aeronautic successes and experiments with electricity were the talk of the educated classes. A universal literacy law had just been passed, and His Majesty Sauron the VIII has declared at a session of parliament (with his usual ton-of-bricks humor) that he intended to equate truancy and treason. The excellent work of an experienced diplomatic corps and a powerful intelligence apparatus permitted a drastic reduction of the professional army, so that it was not a major burden on the economy.

But it was at that time that the words that changed the entire history of Middle Earth were said; strangely, they repeated almost exactly a prophetic utterance made in another World regarding a very different country: "A state that is unable to feed itself and is dependent on food imports cannot be considered a formidable foe."[16]

CHAPTER 4

Arnor, the Tower of Amon Súl

November, year 3010 of the Third Age

Those words were uttered by a tall white-bearded old man in a silvery-gray cloak with its hood thrown back; he stood with his fingertips resting on the surface of a black oval table, surrounded by four people in high-backed armchairs, half in shadow. By some signs, his speech had been a success and the Council was on his side, so now the piercing dark blue eyes of the standing man, which contrasted starkly with the parchment-yellow skin of his face, were focused on only one of the four—the one he would have to battle now. That man, huddling tightly in his blinding-white cloak, sat at a slight distance, as if already separating himself from the rest of the Council; he appeared to have a strong fever. Presently he straightened out, clutching the chair arms, and his deep and smooth voice sounded under the dark ceiling:

"Have you any pity on them?"

"On whom?"

"On the people, Gandalf, the people! As I understand it, you have just sentenced the civilization of Mordor to death, in the name of the higher good. But any civilization consists of people, so they would have to be exterminated, completely, with no chance of recovery. Right?"

"Pity is a poor adviser, Saruman. Haven't you looked in the Mirror with the rest of us?"

Gandalf pointed to the large object in the middle of the table, which looked most like a huge bowl full of quicksilver. "There are many roads to the future, but whichever of them Mordor takes, no later than

three centuries hence it will access the forces of Nature that no one will be able to harness. Would you like to once again watch them turn the entire Middle Earth and Far West into ashes, in a blink of an eye?"

"You are correct, Gandalf, and it would be dishonest to deny such a possibility. But then you should exterminate the Dwarves, too: they have already wakened the Terror of the Deep once, and it took all our magic to prevent it from escaping. You know that those bearded tightwads are mulishly stubborn and not inclined to learn from their mistakes . . ."

"All right, let us not speak of what is possible, and speak only of the inevitable. If you do not wish to look into the Mirror, look at the smoke rising from their coal furnaces and copper refineries. Walk the salt pans into which they have turned the lands west of Núrnen and try to find one living plant on those half-a-thousand square miles. But make sure not to do it on a windy day, when salty dust rises like a wall over the plain of Mordor, choking everything in its path . . . And note that they have done all that barely out of the crib; what do you think they will do later?"

"Gandalf, a child is always a disaster in the house. First dirty diapers, then broken toys; later, the family clock taken apart; to say nothing of what happens when he grows up a bit.

A house without children, on the other hand, is a model of cleanliness and order, yet somehow its owners are usually not too happy about that, especially as they age."

"Saruman, always have I been amazed by your cunning ability to turn another's words inside out, and disprove obvious truths via sly casuistry. But by the Halls of Valinor! it will not work now. The Middle Earth population is now a multitude of peoples living in harmony with nature and the heritage of their ancestors. These people and their entire way of life are now under a dire threat, and my duty is to avert it at all costs. A wolf plundering my sheep has its own reasons for doing so, but I have no intent of figuring them out!"

"I am, by the way, no less concerned with the fate of the Gondorians and the Rohirrim than you are; but I look further into the future. Do you, a member of the White Council, not know that the totality of magical knowledge by its very nature cannot grow beyond what was once received from Aulë and Oromë? You can lose it quicker or slower, but no one has the power to reverse the loss. Every generation of wizards is weaker than the previous one; sooner or later men will face Nature alone. And then they will need Science and

Technology—provided you haven't eradicated those by then."

"They don't need your science, for it destroys the harmony of the world and dries up the souls of men!"

"Strange is the talk of Soul and Harmony on the lips of a man who is about to start a war.

As for science, it is dangerous not to them, but to you—or, rather, to your warped self-esteem. What are we wizards but consumers of that which our predecessors have created, while they are creators of new knowledge? We face the Past, they face the Future. You have once chosen magic, and therefore will never cross the boundaries set by the Valar, whereas in their science the growth of knowledge—and hence, power—is truly unlimited.

You are consumed by the worst kind of envy—that of a craftsman for an artist . . . Well, I suppose this is a weighty enough reason for murder; you're neither the first nor the last."

"You don't believe this yourself," Gandalf shrugged calmly.

"No, I suppose I do not," Saruman shook his head sadly. "You know, those who are motivated by greed, lust for power, or wounded pride are half-way tolerable, at least they feel pangs of conscience sometimes. But there is nothing more fearsome than a bright-eyed enthusiast who'd decided to benefit mankind; such a one can drown the world in blood without hesitation. Those people's favorite saying is: 'There are things more important than peace and more terrible than war'[17]—I believe you've heard this one, no?"

"I accept the responsibility, Saruman; History will vindicate me."

"I have no doubt that it will; after all, history will be written by those who will win under your banner. There are tried and true recipes for that: cast Mordor as the Evil Empire that wished to enslave the entire Middle Earth, and its inhabitants as non-human monsters that rode werewolves and ate human flesh . . . I am not talking about history now, but rather yourself. Allow me to repeat my rude question about the people who hold the knowledge of the civilization of Mordor. That they will have to be destroyed, quite literally, is beyond doubt—'uproot the weed entirely'—otherwise the whole endeavor is meaningless. I would like to know, then, whether you—yes, you personally—will participate in the weeding; will you cut off their heads yourself?.. Silence? Such are ever your ways, you benefactors of humanity! Craft the Final Solution to the Mordorian problem, sure, but when it's time to implement it, you always hide in the bushes. It's executioners you need, so that you can later point at them in disgust:

it's all their excesses . . ."

"Drop the demagoguery, Saruman," one of those seated, in a blue cloak, cut in abruptly in annoyance, "and better look in the Mirror. The danger is obvious even to a blind man! If we don't stop Mordor now, we will not be able to do it ever: in fifty years or so they will complete this 'industrial revolution' of theirs, figure out that saltpeter mixtures are good for things other than fireworks, and that will be the end of all. Their armies will become invincible, while the other countries will fall over themselves copying their 'achievements', with everything that follows . . . Speak, if you have something relevant to say!"

"While I wear the white cloak of the Head of the Council, you will have to listen to everything I have to say," the other replied curtly. "Actually, I am not going to mention that by deciding to determine the fates of the world you four are usurping a right that wizards never had; I can see that this would be useless. I will therefore speak in terms you can understand."

The body language of his opponents vividly conveyed indignation, but Saruman has already decided to abandon all diplomacy.

"Strictly from a technical standpoint, Gandalf's plan to strangle Mordor through a prolonged war and a food blockade seems sound; however, it has a weakness. In order to win such a difficult war, the anti-Mordor coalition will need a powerful ally, and so the plan proposes to wake the Powers that have been slumbering since the previous, pre-human Era; to wit, the inhabitants of the Enchanted Forests. This is madness all by itself, for these Powers have never served anybody but themselves, but even so it's not enough for you. To ensure victory, you have decided to turn the Mirror over to them for the duration of the war, since only participants have the right to use it to plan military action. That is madness squared, but I am prepared to consider even that option, as long as colleague Gandalf can intelligently answer just one question: how does he propose to reclaim the Mirror afterwards?"

Gandalf waved his hand dismissively. "I believe that problems ought to be resolved as they come up. Besides, why should we assume that they will not want to return the Mirror?

What the hell do they need it for?"

Silence fell; indeed, Saruman has failed to anticipate such monumental stupidity. All of them, then, consider it proper . . . It seemed to him that he was floundering in the icy water of a March

ice-hole: another moment, and the current will drag him under the edge.

"Radagast! Would you like to say anything?" It sounded like a plea for help.

The brown-clad figure gave a start, like a pupil caught sneaking a look at a cheat sheet, and awkwardly tried to cover something on the table. There was an indignant screech, and a baby squirrel that Radagast must have been playing with all along raced up his sleeve. It sat on his shoulder, but the embarrassed forest wizard whispered something to it, bending a bushy eyebrow, and the animal obediently slunk somewhere inside his cloak.

"Dearest Saruman . . . please forgive an old man, but . . . erm . . . I wasn't listening all that closely here . . . Just don't fight, all right? I mean, if even we start to bicker, what's gonna happen to the world, eh? See . . . And as for those folks from the Enchanted Forests, I mean, aren't you . . . you know . . . a bit hard on them? I remember seeing them when I was young, from afar, for sure, but they seemed all right by my reckoning; they have their own weirdness, but who doesn't? Also they're always at one with the birds and the beasties, not like your Mordorians . . . So I reckon, it might be fine, eh?"

So that's it, concluded Saruman and slowly ran his palm across his face, as if trying to remove a spider's web of enormous weariness. The only one who may have supported him.

He had no strength left to fight; it's over, he's under the ice.

"You are not just in the minority; you are alone, Saruman. Of course, all your suggestions are of enormous value to us." Gandalf's voice was fairly dripping with false respect now.

"Let us discuss right away the question of the Mirror—it is, indeed, a complicated question . . ."

"This is your problem now, Gandalf," Saruman spoke quietly but firmly, undoing the *mithril* clasp at his throat. "You have long sought the White Cloak—here, take it. Do whatever you think necessary, but I quit your Council."

"Then your staff will lose power, you hear!" Gandalf yelled at his back; it was clear that he was stunned and no longer understood his perennial rival.

Saruman turned around and took one last look at the gloomy hall of the White Council. An edge of the white cloak spilled down off the armchair to the floor, like moon-silvered water in a fountain; the *mithril* clasp sent him a farewell flash and winked out. Radagast, who

must have risen to follow him, was frozen in mid-stride with arms sticking out awkwardly; the wizard suddenly looked small and miserable, like a child in the middle of a parents' quarrel. It was then that he uttered a phrase that amazingly matched the one spoken on a similar occasion in another World:

"What you are about to do is worse than a crime. It is a mistake."[18]

In a few weeks Mordor's intelligence reported from the edges of the Northern woods the sudden appearance of 'Elves'—slender golden-haired creatures with mellifluous voices and permafrost in their eyes.

CHAPTER 5

Middle Earth, the War of the Ring

Historical brief

Should our reader be minimally acquainted with analysis of major military campaigns and examine the map of Middle Earth, he would easily ascertain that all actions of both new coalitions (Mordor-Isengard and Gondor-Rohan) were dictated by merciless strategic logic, undergirded by Mordor's dread of being cut off from its food sources. Through Gandalf's efforts the center of Middle Earth turned into a highly unstable geopolitical "sandwich" with Mordor and Isengard the bread and Gondor and Rohan the bacon. Most ironic was the fact that the Mordor coalition, which wanted nothing but the preservation of the *status quo*, was in an ideal position for an offensive war (whereby it could immediately force its opponents to fight on two fronts), but in a highly unfavorable one for a defensive war (when the united opponents could conduct a blitzkrieg, crushing foes one by one).

Saruman, however, lost no time, either. He visited Theoden and Denethor (the kings of Rohan and Gondor) and used his personal charm and eloquence to convince them that Isengard and Barad-Dur wanted nothing but peace. In addition, he partially revealed to Denethor and Sauron the secret of the two *palantíri* that have been kept in both capitals since time immemorial, and taught them to use those ancient magic crystals as a means of direct communication; this simple move did much to build trust between the neighboring sovereigns. An Isengard consulate was established in Edoras at King Theoden's court; it was headed by Grima, an excellent diplomat, experienced intelligence officer, and master of courtly intrigue. For

quite some time Saruman and Gandalf carefully jockeyed for position, strictly in the area of dynastic relationships.

To wit, Theoden's only son Theodred, known for his sober mind and temperateness, was killed in the North under suspicious circumstances, allegedly in an Orc raid. As a result, the new heir was the king's nephew Éomer—a brilliant general, the darling of the officer corps, and, obviously, one of the 'war party' leaders. In a setback to Gandalf, however, he began 'measuring the drapes of the palace' way too openly with his friends. Grima, who had an excellent intelligence network, had no trouble putting together a good collection of all the drunken boasts and submitting it to Theoden through a proxy. Consequently, Éomer was excluded from active politics to such an extent that Grima stopped paying any attention to him (which turned out later to have been a big mistake). In Gondor, Saruman succeeded in undermining the position of Prince Boromir, another well-known brawler, and getting him removed from court; the prince left in a huff, seeking adventure in northern lands (with rather unpleasant consequences, but again later). In general, the first round went to Saruman.

Nevertheless, although all three kings clearly understood that "a bad peace is better than a good war," conditions remained highly unstable. The food situation in Mordor continued to deteriorate, so the security of the trade routes to the South through Ithilien became what is known as a "national paranoia." In such circumstances the smallest provocation can cascade, and there was no lack of those. So after several caravans in a row were wiped out near Ithilien Crossing by people who came from nowhere but wore green cloaks of Gondor (although they spoke with a pronounced Northern accent), there was a full-fledged reaction.

Saruman immediately contacted Sauron via his *palantír*; he cajoled, pleaded, and threatened, but to no avail. Logical arguments did not work anymore, and the king, whose power had always been rather nominal, could do nothing about the fear-crazed merchants sitting in the parliament. So it was that on the morrow of April 14th, 3016 of the Third Era the army of Mordor, two hundred light cavalry strong, entered the demilitarized (under a recent treaty with Gondor) Ithilien "to provide security against robbers to the trade routes." In response, Gondor mobilized its army and took control of Osgiliath. The trap was sprung.

Mordor then made another mistake, although, as it always is with

strategic decisions, they can only be judged *post factum*: had the move worked, as it had every chance of doing, it would no doubt have been recorded as brilliant. An attempt was made to split the enemy coalition by getting Rohan out of the spat over Ithilien, which was of no real concern to them. To that end, four best battalions of Mordor's army were sent over Anduin. This expeditionary force was supposed to covertly travel over the northern edge of the Plains of Rohan, where intelligence reported no regular armed presence, and join the army of Isengard. The risk was great, but smaller detachments have already traversed that route without incident. Indeed, had a strike force capable of reaching Edoras in five days' march been established in the Rohirrim's backyard, without a doubt the latter would have concentrated on guarding the entrance to Helm's Deep and abandoned any thought of a raid to the South. Mordor could then seek a compromise over Ithilien with the suddenly lonely Gondor.

That was when the Mirror first made a difference; imagine a contemporary fast-moving war in which one side has the advantage of space-based surveillance. Éomer, practically under house arrest at the time, got comprehensive information about Mordor's move from Gandalf, and realized that a general only gets such a chance once in a lifetime. Taking advantage of Theoden's illness and his enormous popularity among the troops, he moved the elite Rohan army units north. At that point he had nothing to lose; failure would no doubt have cost him his head for treason.

But the Mirror spoke truly. Five days later the armored cavalry of Rohan suddenly struck Mordor's expeditionary force out of Fangorn Wood; the enemy had no time to even break out of the marching formation. The swift attack was devastating; nevertheless, a significant part of the heavy infantry (mostly Trolls) did manage to form into its famous 'granite blocks' and fought back for several hours, taking a large toll on the attackers. When night fell, they tried to move into Fangorn, hoping to escape the mounted pursuers in the thicket, but all fell to the poisoned arrows of the Elvish bowmen in their tree perches.

The Rohirrim paid dearly for their victory, but the elite of the Mordorian army was no more; only the light Orocuen cavalry managed to escape. Éomer triumphantly returned to Edoras, and Theoden had to pretend that all was going according to a pre-existing plan. At the same time the king was publicly presented with evidence that the Isengard consul was spying on Rohan; although nearly all diplomats have been doing so since the world was created, Theoden

now had to support the war party and had no choice but to declare Grima a *persona non grata*.

In the meantime, Rohan troops, still drunk with the Fangorn victory, filled up the palace square, clanging swords against shields, and demanded of their beloved Éomer that he lead them, no matter where. The general raised his sword high, as if to stab the setting sun, and cried: “To Isengard!”—whereupon Gandalf, standing not far away in the shadow of a battlement, knew that he had earned some rest. His work was done.

CHAPTER 6

In the South, meanwhile, a ‘strange war’[19] went on. Although the Osgiliath Crossing had changed hands three times in two years, neither of the foes had made any attempts to follow up on their successes and take the fight to the other side of Anduin. The fighting consisted of a series of ‘noble contests’—something between a gladiator show and a knightly joust.

The best warriors were known by name on both sides, and bets were made regardless of the personal allegiances of the bettors; the officers competed in civility and never failed to congratulate an opponent on his monarch’s birthday or some other state occasion before running him through. The only dissonant note in this exalted symphony of courteous killing was sounded by the bands of Dúnadan ‘rangers’, gathered here like flies to carrion. Those mostly “harassed enemy communications”—or, to put it plainly, robbed caravans. The Mordorians considered them bandits rather than enemy combatants, to be dealt with harshly in wartime, and hung not a few of those ‘rangers’ off the leafy oaks along the Ithilien highway. The Northerners paid back in the same coin when they could. No wonder that working men like Tzerlag saw this ‘war’ as total baloney.

The Battle of Fangorn changed the situation drastically. Even prior to it the armies of Mordor and Isengard numbered no more than a third of the combined forces of Gondor and Rohan. After the task force perished, Mordor had no defensive strategies left; it had no chance of holding Ithilien with the forces it had. Sure, those were more than sufficient to hold the fastnesses in the passes of the Ash and Shadow Mountains, but what good was that?

Gondor and Rohan had no need to storm those citadels; it was quite sufficient to simply establish a blockade and wait for Mordor to surrender or starve to death. The powers-that-be in Barad-Dur considered the situation soberly and realized that they had only one chance to break this stranglehold.

While Isengard remains unconquered in Rohan's rear, the Rohirrim will not risk moving their army to the southeast, beyond Anórien. Although Isengard's army is small, taking the city is no easy task, since primitive Rohan has no decent siege engines. Therefore, Mordor has some time, at least six months. Under cover of the low-grade war in Ithilien, this time must be used to gather all of the country's resources into a fist—muster all men, hire mercenaries, request assistance from allies (the Easterlings and especially the Haradrim).

Then this entire force must suddenly crush Gondor's army in a blitzkrieg while it is temporarily deprived of Rohan's aid. Afterwards, Mordor will conclude the war quickly under the well-known 'land for peace'[20] scenario, keeping control of the Ithilien Crossing.

The risk is huge, but there is no other choice!

The Mirror gave this plan a decent chance of success. Gandalf was extremely concerned, because the war in the northwest was not going as well as he expected. Éomer made a quick march west and did manage to capture the strategically important Helm's Deep after a bloody battle at Hornburg, breaking into Isen's valley. But it was a pyrrhic victory; the attackers' losses were such that there was no question of storming Isengard. The only option was a siege, which was what Mordor was counting on.

The Elves found a solution. When the Rohirrim approached Isengard, they were stunned to behold a large lake in its place; the Orthanc stuck out of its middle absurdly, like a log out of a swamp. The Elves had solved the problem radically by breaching the dams of the Isen the previous night, drowning the sleeping city with its defenders. Horrified Gandalf and hotly angry Éomer (the riches of Isengard, which were the reason for this campaign, were now at the bottom of a lake) went to visit the Elves to settle a few things.

They came back after dark much subdued, silent, avoiding looking at each other. Surprised officers asked Éomer whether they should celebrate victory; the general snapped:

"Whatever," went to his tent and uncharacteristically drank himself into a stupor all alone.

Gandalf, for some reason of his own, hurried to Orthanc and tried to talk to Saruman; after an icy rebuff he slumped listlessly at the water's edge, watching the moon's reflection.

When all is said and done, the Elves are probably correct—the most important goal right now is to free up forces in the north and lead the Rohirrim south . . . But the Mirror . . . Was Saruman The Fastidious

right back then?.. Better not to think about it, there's no way back now anyway . . . And that Dúnadan ranger, what's his name? Aragorn? Arathorn? What do the Elves need him for, all of a sudden?

All the while the war in the south was picking up steam. Of course, it is impossible to hide troop movements on the scale of those started by Mordor from enemy intelligence, even if those did not possess the Mirror. Gondor also began moving its allied forces towards Minas Tirith from Anfalas, Ethir, and Dol Amroth, but Mordor deployed first. After a successful feint to the north (towards Lórien and further to Esgaroth) had tied up most of the Elvish army there, the main force of Mordor's army slammed Gondor. Osgiliath was taken on the march; six days later, having overrun and scattered the more numerous but badly positioned units of the army of Gondor, the victorious South Army had camped with all of its siege engines at the walls of Minas Tirith, which was still unprepared for a siege. The formidable Pelennor fortifications have been stormed immediately prior to that in only a couple of hours. So when the *palantír* in Denethor's quarters suddenly came to life and Sauron offered an immediate peace in exchange for Mordor's right to maintain a limited military presence in Ithilien, the king agreed right away, reasoning quite correctly that he was getting a heifer for a chick. Then, something strange happened.

The next day a man in a white cloak appeared in Sauron's *palantír*. Introducing himself as the military commandant of Minas Tirith, he said that the signing of the peace treaty will have to wait for a few days, due to a sudden illness of the king of Gondor. Why isn't Prince Faramir conducting these negotiations? Oh, the prince is literally hovering between life and death, having been struck by a poisoned arrow. What do you mean—"whose?!" The Mordorian army has no poisoned arrows? Really? Hmm . . . Honestly, he doesn't know. As for Prince Boromir, unfortunately, he is believed to have been killed somewhere in the North. In other words, let's just wait a week or so, while the king gets better; yes, just a formality.

So the Mordorians waited. The war is over, soon we'll go home. Sure, discipline is important, but how about a little celebration of the victory, eh? After all, even if Isengard falls and the Rohirrim go south, Saruman will let us know, so even if worse comes to worse, there will be plenty of time to prepare a welcome party . . . Little did they know that Saruman's *palantír* was only silent because defecting Grima took it along as a 'dowry,' and Rohan's army was only a three days' march off.

CHAPTER 7

Gondor, the Field of Pelennor

March 15, 3019

The Mordorians only realized that they have been had when the brown splotch of Rohan's army began spreading through the northern edge of the white fog blanketing the Field of Pelennor, while Gondor's troops poured through the opened gates of Minas Tirith, quickly congealing into battle formations. Fury tripled the strength of the duped 'victors;' they hit the Gondorians hard enough to send them flying before the Rohirrim made it to the battlefield, almost gaining the city gates in hot pursuit. The armored cavalry of Rohan, tired by the long march, did not live up to expectations; it turned out to be less than easily maneuverable, so light Orocuen cavalry calmly showered it with arrows, easily avoiding a head-on clash. Although the South Army of Mordor was outnumbered two to one and surprised to boot, the scales began tipping in its favor.

It was then that fresh forces landed in the Mordorians' rear at the southeast edge of the Pelennor field from ships that had just gone up the Anduin. The landed force was small, and the Mordorian commander did not pay much attention to the first panicked reports: "those can't be killed!" In the meantime the battle intensified. On the northern edge of the field the Umbarian bowmen and deftly maneuvering Orocuen cavalry completely tied up the armor of Rohan; in the west the *mûmakil* of the Haradrim trampled and scattered Gondorian infantry once again, while the engineers smashed the famed (supposedly *mithril*) gates of the city to bits in less than ten minutes and began catapult bombardment of the inner ramparts.

Only in the southeast was something alarming happening: the

troops that had landed from the ships were moving forward like a hot knife through butter. When the Commander-South[21] got to the breakthrough, this was what he saw.

A phalanx six deep and about a hundred men across moved unhurriedly across the field in total silence. The warriors were dressed in gray cloaks with hoods covering their faces, and were armed only with long narrow Elvish swords; they had no armor, no helmets, not even shields. There was something weirdly out of place about the soldiers in the forward rank, and it took the commander a few seconds to understand what that was: they were literally studded with three-foot Umbarian arrows, but kept advancing just the same. They were commanded by a horseman in their rear, wearing a tattered camouflage cloak of a Dúnadan ranger, his faceplate closed. The sun was almost directly overhead, yet the horseman cast a long coal-black shadow, while the phalanx cast no shadow at all.

An aide reported to Commander-South that neither cavalry nor the *mûmakil* were able to breach the ranks of those warriors; the animals became wildly uncontrollable on approach.

In the meantime, the invincible phalanx kept pushing northwest—fortunately, rather slowly and too directly. The Trollish armored infantry managed to slow it down some while the engineers moved two batteries of field catapults from the walls of the city. The Commander's reckoning was precise: at the moment he anticipated the entire phalanx went into a large shallow depression, and the catapults placed on its edge opened up withering fire at pre-calculated distances and angles. The three-bucket naphtha bombs turned the hollow into an erupting volcano, and a victory cheer went up to the cold March sky.

It ceased just as quickly, for the ranks of the gray warriors emerged again out of the bursting bubbles of orange naphtha flames. Their cloaks were smoldering and smoking, some were ablaze; the shafts of the arrows studding them were burning, too. Here one of those living torches—the fourth from the right in the forward rank—halted and started breaking into pieces, raising a fountain of sparks; his mates immediately closed ranks. One could see that the bombardment had taken a toll on the grays: at least fifty such firebrands were scattered in the middle of the depression, where the brunt hit. Some of those kept trying to get up and walk.

The general slammed the pommel with his fist—let the pain bring him back to the real world and banish all traces of this nightmare

from his brain . . . No such luck. He is still standing at the edge of a burned-out depression on the Pelennor field, and his warriors, ever ready to follow him into fire and water, will break into flight at any moment, for this is simply beyond their ken! Without thinking any more, he thundered: “Mordor and The Eye!” and, scimitar raised high, spurred his horse towards the right flank of the gray ranks—for it was there that the closed-helmeted Dúnadan has moved now, for some reason of his own.

When the Commander-South neared the phalanx, his mount reared and almost tossed him from the saddle. Now he could see the enemy warriors clearly and knew that the numerous ‘panic-mongers’ were right. These were, indeed, the living dead: respectable-looking parchment-skinned mummies with eyes and mouths carefully sewn shut; horribly bloated drowned men dripping greenish goo; skeletons covered with tatters of blackened skin, cause of death now indeterminable to the best pathologist. The corpses stared at him, and a chillingly terrifying low growl went up; such is the growl of a sheepdog about to go for the enemy’s throat. The general had no time to be terrified, though—a dozen gray figures have already detached themselves from the rear right corner of the formation, clearly intending to block his way to the indecisively halted Dúnadan, so he spurred the stallion again.

He broke through the line of the dead with surprising ease: they turned out to be rather slow and no match for a fighter of his caliber one-on-one. A hanged man with a lolling tongue and bulging eyes had barely raised his sword when Commander-South sliced through his sword-arm with a lightning-fast horizontal flick of his wrist and then cut the enemy almost in half from the right shoulder down. The others backed away for some reason and made no more attempts to stop him. Meanwhile the Dúnadan was clearly deciding whether he should fight or run, and seeing that he had no chance of escaping, dismounted decisively and drew his Elvish sword. So that’s how you want it, eh? Fight on foot—fine. Shouting the traditional: “Defend yourself, fair sir!” the commander of the South Army jumped nimbly off his horse, thinking in passing that this northern bandit hardly deserved to be called ‘sir.’

The phalanx had already moved away a hundred yards or so and kept going; seven of the undead stood in the distance, not taking their unseeing eyes off the duelists; a ringing silence fell.

He suddenly realized with a clarity that amazed him that this one

duel will determine the outcome not only of this battle, but the fate of entire Middle Earth for many years to come.

His inner voice then said in an eerily pleading tone: “Think this through, while there’s still time! Please!”—as if trying to warn him without knowing how. But he had thought this through already! They are both lightly armored, so his curved scimitar will have a clear advantage over any straight western sword; the guy doesn’t seem to be a leftie, so no surprises there; it would’ve been better to fight on horseback, but let’s not be greedy . . . It’s all set—ready to serve, as the saying goes!

The Dúnadan awaited him without trying to maneuver: knees slightly bent, upraised sword held in both hands, hilt against the belt buckle; all his earlier indecisiveness was gone. The general quickly approached to within about seven paces, right up to the maximum reach of the northerner, and started feinting: right, left, then his favorite distracting move—a quick pass of the scimitar to the left hand and back . . .

A terrible blow in the back felled him. He managed to twist sideways (“Spine’s still there . . .”), lifted his head and thought distantly: yes, I have underestimated those deaders . . . so they can move real fast and real silent when needed . . . northern bastard . . . Amazingly, he managed to get up to one knee, using the scimitar as a crutch; the corpses, having already surrounded him, stood still with swords raised, awaiting word from their commander. The latter was in no hurry; pushing the helmet to the back of his head and chewing on a straw, he gazed at his fallen foe with interest. Then his calm soft voice broke the silence:

“Welcome, Commander-South! I knew that you would come for a one-on-one fight, as is the custom by you nobles,” he smirked, “I was only concerned that you wouldn’t dismount, like I did. Had you kept to the saddle, it all could have been different . . . I’m glad that I didn’t overestimate you, fair sir.”

“You cheated.”

“You fool! I came here to win this war and the crown of Gondor, not some stupid duel. As Tulkas is my witness, I have often played heads-or-tails with death, but always for a goal, never for the hell of it.”

“You cheated,” repeated Commander-South, trying not to cough with the blood from his pierced lung slowly pooling in his mouth. “Even the knights of the North will not shake your hand.”

“Of course they won’t,” laughed the Dúnadan, “since they will be kneeling before the new King of Gondor! I beat you in an honest fight, one on one—so it shall be written in all the history books. As for you, they won’t even remember your name, I’ll make sure of that.

Actually,” he stopped in midstride, hunting for the stirrup, “we can make it even more interesting: let you be killed by a midget, some tiny little dwarf with hairy paws. Or by a broad . . . yes, that’s how we’ll do it.”

He mounted quickly, gestured once to his dead men and set the horse to follow the distant phalanx. He turned back only once, checking in annoyance: are they catching up or what?

The corpses, though, were still standing in a circle, their swords rising and falling like threshing flails.

CHAPTER 8

Meanwhile, the battle continued. True, the Mordorian troops now parted before the ranks of the undead without a fight, but there were no Western Coalition troops in the southeastern part of the battlefield to take advantage of the breach made by Aragorn. Besides, the clash at the depression had demonstrated that the gray warriors were not totally invincible; they were hard but not impossible to kill. The phalanx, without guidance for a few minutes, kept going forward until by sheer accident it wandered into the range of stationary long-range catapults trained on the citadel of Minas Tirith. The Mordorian engineers lost no time in turning these around and opening fire, this time with forty-bucket naphtha incendiary barrels rather than three-bucket jars. Hit by monstrous fiery whirlwinds and not seeing the enemy (who was firing from a concealed position), the phalanx kept going forward mindlessly, getting deeper into the killing zone with every step, so that when Aragorn, catching up on a lathered horse, ordered an immediate retreat, it had to traverse the same deadly terrain a second time.

This time the losses were so great that the Dúnadan decided to rejoin the main forces to the west before it was too late; that proved to be difficult. Now, Orocuen horsemen dogged the decimated phalanx like piranhas, expertly lassoing the undead, especially in the rear row, pulling them out of the ranks and dragging them away, where they methodically hacked the corpses into tiny pieces. Trying to rescue their captured comrades, the gray warriors had to break ranks, which made things all the worse for them. You have to give Aragorn his due: he managed to close the ranks and break through to the Gondorian side under cover of brief counterattacks, personally cutting down two Mordorian officers in the process. They had to cover the last hundred fifty yards under fire from portable catapults once again, so that only a few dozen living dead made it back to the Gondorians, almost inducing them to flee.

So Aragorn's gray phalanx almost completely perished, but it did its job. First, it had diverted substantial Mordorian forces, especially the catapults, without which the inner fortifications of Minas Tirith could not be taken. More importantly, after the death of Commander-South the South Army was deprived of overall direction and allowed itself to be drawn into head-to-head fighting for mutual annihilation—a losing proposition where the foe is so much more numerous. Nevertheless, the Mordorians kept fighting skillfully and determinedly; the March day was already failing, but the Coalition still hadn't managed to utilize its two-to-one advantage. The main action was in the northern direction, where Trollish infantry and Umbarian bowmen managed to beat off the Rohirrim's attempts to break through their defense line, despite large losses.

. . . Éomer slowly made his way past the line of Rohan and Dol Amroth cavalry, just rolled back from another unsuccessful attack, the fourth one today. In reality, to call this gloomy crowd of men and horses, some wounded and all exhausted to the limit a 'line' would be a stretch. He had been trying to straighten out the faceplate of his helmet, bent in by a Haradi club, when they informed him that Theoden was among those who perished in the last attack. After the victorious march on Isengard the old man was convinced that Éomer was going to use his coming glory of the victor over Mordor to strip him of his crown, and watched his nephew with a hawk's eye. That was why he headed the march to the southeast himself, and then stripped his most popular general of his command right before the battle.

The king was determined to win this one all by himself, "without the snot-nosed youths," and so ignored all tactical advice and sacrificed the best of Rohan's cavalry in senseless head-on attacks. Now he, too, was dead.

Éomer, now in charge, gazed at the glum ranks of the Rohirrim, shivering in the brutal March wind. He felt like a physician who has been graciously allowed to treat the patient after the latter had already slipped into coma. The worst of it was that the army of Mordor was in the same shape, if not worse; experience and keen battle intuition of the general told him in no uncertain terms that one decisive assault could swing the battle now. He saw clearly the weak spots in the enemy's line and knew exactly where to strike and how to develop a successful breach, but he also knew that he dare not order his men forward. There is an unwritten law no one dares break: one

may only give an order when he's sure that it will be followed, otherwise it's the end of everything that sustains an army. He saw just as clearly that these men could not be roused for another attack, not today.

So he stopped his horse, ordered everyone to dismount—to be seen better by more men—and launched into a speech strange for a warrior:

"We're all mortal, guys[22]; what the hell does it matter if it's sooner or later? To me, it's way more interesting what's gonna happen to us afterwards. You probably think the general's nuts to talk about life after death right now, but I reckon—when's a better time? I mean, we're simple guys—live in the field, pray to a shield, once the danger's over we give it no thought till the next time . . . Well, guys, there're plenty of opinions about what's gonna be, but one thing everyone agrees on is that we all get whatever we believe in. So if you think that once your corpse rots there's nothing left of you but a handful of dust, then that's how it's gonna be with you. Some faiths are even worse—you wander around the underworld forever as a shade—better to rot to nothing, indeed, than such a fate! Some expect to lie on the green grass in a pretty garden, drink heavenly nectar and play the lyre; not bad, but kinda dull to my tastes. But there is a wonderful faith in the Eastern lands—a travelling missionary told me all about it a few days ago—and it's pretty damn good, no fooling, but its Paradise is what's best, just my style."

He looked around—the men seemed to be listening—and continued:

"A palace in Heaven and in it a feast to shame a royal wedding, wine flows like water from a spring, but the best part is the *houranies*[23]. Those are girls who are always eighteen, beautiful beyond belief, and no doubts about their looks, for they are dressed only in a bracelet or two. And as for screwing—there are no such experts down here! One problem, though—only the righteous men are allowed there, guys such as us have no chance . . ."

The ranks stirred distinctly, a rumble rose and fell, someone spat: cheated, again! Éomer raised a hand and silence fell again, broken only by the listless susurration of dead grass.

"That is to say—no chance but one. There is one loophole for losers such as ourselves. In this wonderful faith anyone killed fighting for a just cause—and who'd dare say that our cause is unjust?—has all his sins forgiven and automatically considered righteous. So if any of you

guys wanna get to this Paradise by living righteously—good luck to you! As for me, I have no such hopes, so I'm gonna join the *houranies* right here and now as a valiant martyr—when else am I gonna have such a chance? So whoever wants to and can—follow me, and good luck to the rest!"

He stood in the stirrups and yelled somewhere skyward, using his armor glove as a bullhorn:

"Ahoy, gals! Open up the Heavenly bordello, never mind the hour! Stand ready to receive three best battalions of Rohan cavalry—bet my head to a broken arrow that you won't ever forget these customers! We're about to attack, so we'll join you in Heaven in about ten minutes, that should be enough for you to get ready!"

And a miracle happened: the men began to stir! Laughter and elaborate cussing rose in the ranks; someone from the right flank inquired whether one could catch clap from a *hourani* and if so, how long it would take to cure in Heaven. Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, a handsome man famous for his amorous exploits, told a furiously blushing youngster on the left flank:

"Head up, cornet! Those in the know say that there are beauties for every taste in that establishment. They must have lined up a flock of romantic maidens for you already, pining for a chance to hear you recite some verses in the moonlight!"

The young man blushed even more to booming laughter and glared angrily at the prince from under (positively girlish) thick lashes. Éomer wheeled his horse around so that dirt flew from under its hooves in a fan and called out:

"To saddle, guys! The madam up there must've already sent for more wine for the new customers. By the laughter of Tulkas, today every one of you will get enough Núrnen wine to drown in, be it in heaven, be it on earth! The Valar will treat the fallen, the King of Rohan will treat the living! After me!.."

He tossed his mangled helmet aside and looked back no more as he rushed the horse towards where his trained eye had spotted a tiny patch of foreign color in the unbreakable stockade of Trollish armored infantry—the dark round shields of Easterling spearmen. The wind whistled in his ears and tossed his sweaty flaxen hair; Imrahil was galloping on his right, almost nose-to-nose.

"Dammit, Prince, put on your helmet—bowmen to the right!"

"After you, fair sir!" the prince grinned at him, twirled his sword over his head, and called out in a voice hoarse from shouting orders:

“Dol Amroth and the Swan!”

“Rohan and the White Horse!” echoed Éomer, while behind their backs the thunder of thousands of hooves was already building to a majestic staccato: the riders of Rohan and Dol Amroth were making their last charge, to win or die.

CHAPTER 9

Everybody knows that Easterling infantry is far inferior to Mordor's; Éomer's charge scattered them like bowling pins, and the shining edge of Western cavalry crashed through the Mordorian defensive line. A little later another force slammed into their rear—a cutting edge of Aragorn's remaining gray warriors, encased with Gondorian armored infantry. By about six in the evening those fangs met deep in the body of the South Army, near its camp.

The battle as such was over then, and slaughter began. The parked siege engines were set ablaze, and the dancing flames highlighted now an Orocuen hospital wagon stuck in the mud, then an arrow-studded *mûmak* dashing around the field, trampling friend and foe alike.

Éomer had just run into Aragorn in this chaos of victory and was ceremoniously hugging his brother-in-arms to everyone's victory whoops, when he noticed a horseman approaching them at full gallop —the blushing cornet. To tell the truth, the boy had more than acquitted himself, worthy of a medal. When the Rohirrim ran into the remnants of the Southern cavalry near the camp, he took on a Haradi lieutenant one-on-one, knocking the black giant out of the saddle (to everyone's astonishment) and seizing the enemy's scarlet cape emblazoned with the Snake—the very cape he was now waving triumphantly. A dozen paces short of the fatherly gazing leaders the cornet dismounted, pulled off the helmet, shook his head like an unruly horse, and suddenly a mass of hair tumbled over his shoulders, the color of the sun-kissed prairie grass of the Plains of Rohan.

"Éowyn!" was all Éomer could say. "What the hell!.."

The shield-maiden stuck her tongue out at him, tossed him the Haradi cape in passing—he was left standing, stunned, clutching his sister's trophy—and stopped in front of Aragorn.

"Greetings, Ari!" she said calmly; Nienna only knew the price of that calmness.

"Congratulations on the victory. As I see it, the wartime excuses are

now void. So if you don't need me anymore, say so now and, by the stars of Varda, I will immediately stop bothering you!"

"How can you say that, my Amazon!" and there she was in his saddle, looking at him with shining eyes, prattling nonsense, and then kissing him in front of everybody—the girls of Rohan are not big on southern ceremony, and a heroine of Pelennor could not care less . . .

All Éomer could do was look at this idyllic picture and get more upset by the minute, thinking: "Fool! Open your eyes and look at his face, it's all written plainly there—what he is to you and what you are to him! Why, why do the idiot girls always fall for scoundrels—this one isn't even handsome . . ." not that he was the first or the last such in that World, or any other . . .

He said none of that aloud, of course, only asked: "Show me your arm." Only when Éowyn protested that she was adult enough to handle it and that it wasn't even a scratch did he let out some of his frustration by yelling loudly and profanely enough to curl ears, describing to the heroine of Pelennor, in graphic detail, what he was going to do to her if she didn't report to the medics by the count of three. Éowyn laughed and saluted: "Yes, my general!" and only the unusual care with which she mounted his horse told him that much more than a scratch was involved here. But the girl had already leaned on her brother's shoulder: "Éom, dear, please don't sulk, spank me if you want, just don't tell Auntie, please?" and rubbed her nose on his cheek, just like in their childhood . . . Aragorn was watching them with a smile, and Éomer shuddered when he caught his look: it was the look in the eye of an archer right before he lets fly.

He only fully grasped the import of that look the next day, when it was too late. There was a council of war in Aragorn's tent that day, attended by Imrahil, Gandalf-Mithrandir, and a few Elvish lords (whose army had arrived the night before, when it was all over). There, the Dúnadan explained to the heir of Rohan (the king now, really) without any pleasantries that he was a subordinate rather than an ally now, and that the life of Éowyn, under special guard in the Minas Tirith hospital, depended entirely on his reasonableness.

"Oh, dear Éomer no doubt can run me through right here and now —and then watch what will happen to his sister in this *palantír*; it won't be a sight for the fainthearted. No, she suspects nothing of the sort, of course; observe how touchingly sincere she is in caring for the wounded Prince Faramir . . . What guarantees? The only guarantee is common sense: when I am the King of Gondor and Arnor, I will have

no one to fear . . . How? Very simply.

As you know, the king of Gondor is dead. A dreadful tragedy, really—imagine, he went mad and immolated himself on a funeral pyre. Prince Faramir had been struck by a poisoned arrow and will not get well for quite a while, if he ever does; this depends . . . ah . . . on a number of factors. Prince Boromir? Alas, no hope there, either—he fell in battle with the Orcs at Anduin, just beyond the Falls of Rauros, and I have put his body on the funeral boat with my own hands. And since there is a war on, the heir of Isildur may not leave the country without a leader. Therefore, I accept command over the Army of Gondor and the entire Western Coalition . . . Were you saying something, Éomer? No?..

"We are immediately moving on Mordor, for I can only accept the crown of Gondor when we return victorious. As for Faramir, I am inclined to grant him one of Gondor's duchies . . . oh, Ithilien, say. To tell the truth, he had always been more interested in poetry and philosophy than in matters of state. But we should not plan that far ahead, since his condition is critical and he may not survive until our return. So pray for his health, dearest Imrahil, incessantly during our campaign; they say that the Valar especially appreciate the prayers of a best friend . . . When do we set out? Immediately after we clean up the remnants of the South Army at Osgiliath. Any questions? Good!"

The moment the tent was empty, the man in a gray cloak standing behind Aragorn said in a respectful reproach: "You have taken an unjustified risk, Your Majesty. This Éomer was clearly beside himself; he could have cast everything aside and lashed out . . ."

The ranger turned to him and bit out: "You strike me as both too talkative and too unobservant for a member of Secret Guard."

"My apologies, Your Majesty—a *mithril* coat of mail under your clothes?"

Aragorn's mocking gaze went over the speaker's swarthy dry face, lingering on rows of tiny holes around the lips. A silence fell for almost a minute.

"Heh, I've almost decided that your brains must've dried up in the crypt and you would now question its provenance . . . By the way, I keep forgetting to ask: why do they sew your mouths shut?"

"Not just mouths, Your Majesty. The belief is that all openings in a mummy's body must be closed up, lest the departed spirit re-enter it on the fortieth day and take vengeance on the living."

"That's a rather naïve method of . . . um . . . contraception."

“Indeed, Your Majesty,” the gray man allowed himself a smile, “and I am living proof of that.”

“Living, eh? How about the ‘vengeance on the living’ bit?”

“We only follow orders. Our shadow is your shadow.”

“So whether I tell you to kill a child or become like a father to him, it’s all the same to you?”

“Absolutely. I will perform either duty to the best of my ability.”

“All right, this suits me. Here’s a job for you in the meantime. The other day one of my Northern comrades-in-arms, a certain Anakit, got drunk and boasted to his friends that soon he will be as rich as Tingol. Supposedly he has information about some legendary sword for which a certain someone will pay any price. This talk has to end immediately.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Those who listened to these boasts . . .”

“Whatever for?”

“You think?..”

“Remember this, my dear friend: I kill without hesitation, but I never—never, you hear me?—kill unless absolutely necessary. Understand?”

“This is truly wise, Your Majesty.”

“You take too many liberties, Lieutenant,” said the ranger in a tone that would chill many a man.

“Our shadow is your shadow,” repeated the other calmly. “So, in a way, you and us are now one. May I carry out your orders?”

There is not much to add. The Western Coalition army (joined by the turncoat Easterlings who were ‘forgiven’ by the victors) set out for its last campaign, the highlight of which was the March 23rd mutiny of the Westfold Rohirrim and Lossarnach militiamen, who could not for the life of them understand why they had to die far from home for Aragorn’s crown.

Having ruthlessly put down the revolt, the Dúnadan brought his army to the Cormallen field at the entrance to Morannon, where he met the last defenders of Mordor; the latter had already exhausted its reserves, having invested them all in the South Army. The coalition won; that is to say, the men of Gondor, Rohan, and East simply piled the fastnesses of Morannon with their corpses. The Elves, as usual, joined the battle when it was already decided. The losses of the victors were so massive that a legend about a huge Army of the East had to

be quickly invented. The Mordorians there died to a man, including King Sauron; the latter fought in the ranks of his Royal Mounted Guard in a captain's cloak, so his body was never identified. The chronicles of the Western countries mostly gloss over the Coalition's deeds after the victory, for the slaughter it carried out inside Mordor had been horrific even by the not-too-humanitarian standards of the time.

Be that as it may, Gandalf's plan had succeeded (if you don't count the small matter of the Mirror, which the Elves had no intention of returning): the Mordorian civilization had ceased to exist. However, the wizards of the White Council had somehow forgotten one factor: namely, that there is a certain Someone in the world Who rather abhors complete victories and assorted 'final solutions,' and is capable of showing His displeasure with same in unimaginably startling ways. Even now, that Someone was dispassionately surveying the vanquished—all that flotsam cast ashore by the passed storm—when suddenly He rested His gaze upon two soldiers of the extinct South Army among the dunes of the desert of Mordor.

CHAPTER 10

Mordor, the Teshgol boundary

April 9, 3019

"So why not wait until nightfall?" Haladdin whispered.

"Because if this really is a trap and the guys who set it are not total idiots, they'll expect company by evening. What does the Field Manual teach us, doctor?" Tzerlag raised a finger. "Right—do the opposite of what the foe expects. So, don't move until my signal, and if I'm lost, may the One preserve me, even more so. Clear?"

He cast another look at the camp and muttered: "Damn, I don't like this picture."

The Teshgol boundary[24] consisted of fixed sands dotted with fairly thick copses of white saxaul in shallow depressions between small hillocks covered with desert serge and sacaton.

The camp consisted of three yurts pitched in a triangle, with entrances facing in, in a small wind-protected hollow about hundred and fifty yards from their hideout, so everything in it was clearly visible. Tzerlag has watched it for an hour, detecting no suspicious movements; however, there were no non-suspicious movements, either, the camp looked deserted. This was very strange, but it was time to make some move.

A minute later Haladdin, holding his breath, watched the scout in his brown cloak fairly ooze along the barely discernible creases in the ground. He was right, of course: the only thing a field medic could do to help was to not bother a professional. True, but it is not very pleasant to sit in the relative safety of a hideout when your comrade is risking his life a few steps away. He scanned the horizon once again and then discovered, to his amazement, that meanwhile the sergeant

has vanished. Nuts! One could almost believe that the scout had turned into an agama lizard and sank into the sand, the way they can; or, more appropriately, was now slithering along as a deadly saw-scaled viper. The doctor has been staring into the hillocks around the camp till his eyes hurt for almost half an hour, when suddenly he saw Tzerlag standing up right between the yurts.

Everything is fine, then! The departure of the feeling of danger was an almost physical pleasure; every muscle of his, previously tense, was now blessedly relaxing, and the world, once discolored by adrenalin, was regaining its natural colors. Climbing out of the pit under a saxaul tree that leaned almost to the ground, Haladdin easily shouldered the bag of gear and marched forward, looking closely at the ground—the slope was seriously dented by desert rats. Almost at the bottom he finally looked up and realized that something was wrong. Seriously wrong, to judge by the Orocuen's behavior: after standing for some time at the entrance to the left yurt, he then trudged to the next one without entering. Yes, trudged—for some reason the sergeant's step had lost its usual spring. Only a barely audible hum disturbed the unnatural quiet of the hollow, like tiny ripples on the oily surface of a swamp . . . Then he suddenly understood everything, recognizing it as the sound of a myriad of flies.

. . . Even in the sandy desert soil it takes more than a few minutes to dig a grave for ten people (four adults, six children); they had to hurry, but they had found only one spade and so had to share. Haladdin was about waist deep when Tzerlag walked up to him.

"Listen, you keep digging, I'll go walk around one more time and check on something."

"You think someone may have survived and is hiding out there?"

"Unlikely, seems they're all here. But over there there's blood on the sand."

"But weren't they all murdered right in the yurts?.."

"That's the point. Keep working, but look around once in a while. I'll whistle if I need you—one long, two short."

He heard the signal in no more than five minutes. The sergeant waved to him from a small dune near the path to the highway, then disappeared behind its crest. Following, Haladdin found the scout crouching before a dark round object; only when he was almost there did he realize that it was the head of a man buried in the sand up to his neck[26], and that the man appeared to still be alive. There was a clay bowl of water a few inches from his lips, just beyond reach.

“That’s who put up a fight back there. Are we too late, doctor?”

“No, it’s all right. See, he’s still sweating, so it’s only the second stage of dehydration, and he has no sunburns, thank the One.”

“Yeah, they put him in the shade of the dune, precisely so that he’d take longer to die. By all signs he’d pissed them off mightily . . . Can I give him water?”

“At the second stage—yes, but only in small portions. But how did you know?..”

“To be honest, I was looking for a corpse.”

With those words Tzerlag put his leather flask to the blackened and cracked lips of the buried man. The man shuddered and gulped down water, but his barely opening eyes remained clouded and lifeless.

“Wait up, fella, not so fast! Hear what the doc says: not all at once. All right, let’s pull him out; the sand is loose here, so we don’t need a spade . . . Got him?”

Shoving the sand back some, they grabbed the man by his underarms and: “One-two!” and pulled him out like a carrot from the garden patch. “Damn!” the Orocuen said with feeling, grabbing his scimitar; the rush of sand off the clothes of the rescued man revealed a green jacket of a Gondorian officer to their stunned gazes.

This, however, did not affect the rescue operations in the slightest, and in a dozen minutes the prisoner was, in Tzerlag’s words, “ready to use.” The cloudiness in his gray eyes gone, his gaze was now steady and slightly mocking. After a quick glance at his rescuers’ uniforms, he fully appraised his situation and, much to their surprise, introduced himself in good, if accented, Orocuenish: “Baron Tangorn, lieutenant of the Ithilien regiment. To whom do I have the honor of speaking?”

For a man who had just miraculously escaped a tortuous death only to face it once again, the Gondorian was acquitting himself very well. The scout gave him a respectful look and stepped aside, nodding to Haladdin to continue.

“Field Medic Second Class Haladdin and Sergeant Tzerlag of the Cirith Ungol Rangers.

Although it doesn’t matter now.”

“Why not?” the lieutenant raised an eyebrow. “Quite a distinguished regiment. If I remember correctly, we met last fall at Osgiliath—the men of Ithilien were defending the southern flank then. By the fist of Tulkas, it was an excellent battle!”

“I’m afraid that now is not the best time to reminisce about those knightly exploits—we’re interested in more recent events. What team

had massacred this camp? Name of commanding officer, number, task, direction of movement? And no fooling: we're not inclined to dither, as you may guess."

The baron shrugged: "Quite legal questions. The company is made up of Easterling mercenaries commanded by Eloar, an Elf; as I understand it, he's a relative of some Lórien ruler. Number: nine people. Their task is roving patrol of a stretch of desert next to the highway and mop-up[25] of said territory as a counter-insurgency measure. Are you satisfied?"

Haladdin closed his eyes involuntarily and once again saw a toy bactrian made of woolen threads, trampled into a pool of coagulated blood. So that's what they call it: 'mopping up territory.' Good to know.

"So how did you end up in the regrettable position in which we found you, Baron?"

"I'm afraid that it's such an unlikely story that you will not believe me."

"Then I will tell you myself. You have attempted to stop this 'mop-up' and wounded one of the mercenaries, perhaps even killed one. Correct?"

The Gondorian looked at them in obvious consternation. "How the hell do you know that?"

"That's not important. Strange behavior for a lieutenant of Gondor, though."

"It's proper behavior for a soldier and a gentleman," the prisoner replied drily. "I hope that you will not view my accidental admission as an attempt to plead for my life."

"Oh, don't worry, Baron. I believe that the sergeant and I owe you at least a partial payment on this debt; looks like it's our turn to behave foolishly . . ." He looked back at the Orocuen; the latter hesitated, but then gestured acceptance: do as you think best.

"Forgive my not-so-idle curiosity: what will you do if we set you free?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. Here, in Mordor, if the Elves capture me they will finish what Eloar's men started, even if not in such an exotic manner. There's nothing to come back to in Gondor: my King is dead, and I do not intend to serve his murderer and usurper . . ."

"What do you mean, Baron? We had no news since Pelennor."

"Denethor died a horrible death; supposedly he immolated himself on a funeral pyre. The very next day there was a ready claimant to the

throne. You see, there's an old legend, which no one has taken seriously before, that the ruling Anarion dynasty is only taking care of the throne for the descendants of the mythical Isildur. Such a descendant has shown up—one Aragorn, of the northern rangers. To prove his dynastic rights he produced a sword, supposedly the legendary *Andúril*, although who had ever seen this *Andúril*? He also performed several healings by laying of hands, although all those healed were from among his northern followers . . . Prince Faramir, the heir apparent, retired to Ithilien and is supposedly a prince there under the eye of Captain Beregond—the same one who confirmed Denethor's 'self-immolation.'"

"And no one in the West objected to all this?"

"Aragorn's Secret Guard—rumor has it that they're all living dead, animated by Elvish magic—had quickly taught Gondorians not to ask such questions. As for Éomer, they get whatever they want from him, which is not surprising, since his sister is under guard with Faramir in Ithilien. Actually, it appears that Aragorn himself is an Elvish puppet, and the real ruler of Gondor is Arwen—his wife from Lórien."

"What about our home, Mordor?"

"Barad-Dur has been razed to the ground. The Elves are now forming a kind of a local administration from all sorts of trash. It seems to me that they are destroying all remnants of civilization and are systematically hunting down anyone with an education. I think they intend to push your people back into the Stone Age."

"What about your people?"

"I think that our turn will come, but for now they need us."

Tzerlag broke the ensuing silence. "All right. First we need to finish burying the people of this camp. After that you can do whatever, but I intend to collect a debt from this—what's his name?—Eloar. The owner of the blue yurt was my aunt twice-removed, so it's a blood feud now."

"May I join you, Sergeant?" Tangorn asked unexpectedly, and explained to the puzzled Orocuen: "They took my sword, a family heirloom. It would be nice to get the *Slumber-maker* back; besides, I would rather like to send these guys my regards from beyond the grave."

The scout studied the Gondorian directly for some time, then nodded: "Tangorn . . . I do remember you from Osgiliath last year. It was you that took down Detz-Zeveg, the 'King of the Spearmen.'"

"Right, I have had this honor."

“The only thing is, we don’t have a sword to fit you. Ever use a scimitar?”

“I’ll figure it out somehow.”

“All right, then.”

CHAPTER 11

Mordor, near the Old Núrnen Highway

Night of April 11, 3019

"Where have you studied languages, Baron?"

"Well, I've spent over six years in Umbar and Khand, if that's what you mean, but I've started at home. Prince Faramir—we're childhood friends—has an excellent library, mostly in Eastern languages, of course; could I let it go unused? That's why I'm here in Mordor, actually—I wanted to sift through the wreckage. Put together a whole bag of books; those guys took it, by the way, together with the *Slumber-maker,* " Tangorn nodded towards the double-crested dune, where darkness hid Eloar's camped company, tracked by Tzerlag.

"Among other things I've found a loose page of excellent verse I haven't seen before:

I swear by near and by far, [27]
I swear by sword and fight that's fair,
I swear by the morning star
I swear by the evening prayer . . .

"Would you happen to know the author?"

"That's Saheddin. Strictly speaking, he's a wizard and an alchemist, not a poet. He publishes verse from time to time, and claims that he's only a translator of texts created in other worlds. You're right, the poetry's great."

"Damn, but that's a cute idea! For sure one can describe the World in a myriad ways, but a true poetic text where you can't change a single letter has to be the most precise and economical one, and universal for that reason alone! If there is anything in common

between various worlds, it has to be poetry . . . and music, of course. Such texts must exist before us, written into the very fabric of what Is and what Could Be by the sound of a seashell, the pain of unrequited love, the smell of spring forest—one must only learn to perceive them . . . Poets do this intuitively, but what if this Saheddin discovered a formal method for doing so? Why not?"

"Right, something like modern geology to look for ores, rather than unreliable guesses of the diviners. So you, too, think that the World is Text[28]?"

"My world certainly is, but that's a matter of taste."

Yeah, the World is Text, thought Haladdin. Wouldn't it be nice to someday read the paragraph describing how one day I will join two likeable professional killers—what else are they?—to hunt nine subhumans—why, how are those different from all the others?—and will conduct a profound discussion of poetry right before the battle, to control the taste of copper in my mouth and the disgusting feeling of cold fear at the pit of my stomach? Truly, the author of such a text has a great imagination and a great future.

His musings were interrupted when a bright double star above the dune hiding them blinked as if obscured by a bird of the night. So this is it . . . would that he could have a stiff drink right now . . . He rose into a crouch and began stuffing his weapons for tonight—a short Orocuen bow of unfamiliar construction and a quiver with six assorted arrows—into his shoulder bag. Meanwhile, Tangorn, still unaccustomed to Tzerlag's skills, stared in mute amazement at the scout who had silently appeared from nowhere a few steps away.

"Fair sirs, one can hear your whispers from thirty paces off. Were it my boys rather than those lowlifes, you'd already be counting stars on the One's robes . . . Whatever, bygones.

Looks like I managed to grab my quarry by the very tail. Way I see it, they are heading for that highway outpost that the Baron had mentioned, and that, I figure, is no more than five or six miles away; we won't be able to get them there. So here's the plan . . ."

Here the sands of the erg bordered the western edge of a large *hamada* of many a square mile—a silent sea rolling its waves onto a grim stony beach. The largest wave was appropriately right against the shoreline—a huge dune stretching half a mile each way from a fire burning at the middle of its foot. The Elf has chosen his campsite wisely: the forty-foot dune slope in the back and the flat expanse of the *hamada* in the front; the two lookouts placed twenty yards to the

north and the south of the fire along the bottom of the dune fully covered all lines of possible attack. Not much fuel around here, but saxaul burns long and hot, almost like coal; a dozen arm-thick logs from every member of the party will provide enough warmth to last the night.

What if it's a trap? Haladdin wondered suddenly. Sure, Tzerlag had sniffed out everything around, but aren't these guys too carefree? Never mind the fire, it's only visible from the *hamada* where no one is supposed to be, but the fact that the sentry goes to the fire to add fuel and warm himself a little—that's total madness, afterwards he can't see anything in the dark for at least three minutes . . . It was during one such departure of the southern sentry that they had crept to within twenty paces of his position. The scout had left them there and melted into the dark: he was supposed to go around the camp by the way of the *hamada* and creep up to the northern sentry. No, he restrained himself; no need to fear your own shadow. It's just that they've grown so unaccustomed to meeting resistance that guarding the camp is a formality to them. Besides, it's their last night out on patrol, tomorrow it will be baths, drink, and all that . . . plus a bonus for every Orc ear . . . I wonder if children's ears bring the same bounty or are a bit cheaper? Stop it! Stop it right there! He bit his lip, hard, feeling another round of shakes coming on—just like back at Teshgol, when he saw the mutilated corpses for the first time. You have to be absolutely calm, you'll be shooting soon . . . yes, like that, relax and meditate . . . like that . . .

He was lying flat on the cold sand, minutely examining the sentry's silhouette. No helmet (and rightly so, can't hear anything in one of those things), so best aim for the head.

Interesting, huh?—here's a man standing, looking at the stars, thinking of pleasant (to him) things, not knowing that he's already dead. Meanwhile the 'dead' man looked enviously at his seven buddies by the fire (three to the south, three to the north, one to the west, between the fire and the slope), and then turned away furtively, produced a flask, took a swig, belched and wiped his lips noisily. Great!.. quite sloppy . . . wonder how his northern counterpart would like that? Suddenly Haladdin's heart lurched and dropped somewhere into the void: it's begun! Begun quite a while ago, too, while he, the idiot! had almost missed it, just like the baron, another simpleton . . . For the northern sentry was already sagging lifelessly to the ground, resting in Tzerlag's firm embrace. Another moment, and the scout

carefully and silently put the Easterling's body down on the sand and *flowed*, like a fox into a rabbit hutch, into the circle of light filled with sleeping forms.

Slowly, as if in a dream, Haladdin rose to one knee and drew the bow; in the corner of his right eye he saw the baron, crouching for a lunge. The sentry must have seen some movement in the dark after all, but instead of shouting an alarm he started (imagine such lucky stupidity!) reflexively putting away the illegal flask. The moment of delay was enough for Haladdin to pull the butt of the arrow to his chin and habitually drop the aim an inch below the target—the clearly backlit head of the sentry; twenty paces, a stationary target, even a baby won't miss. He did not even feel the pain of the bowstring slamming his left arm, for it was immediately followed by the dry and loud, as if into wood, thwack of the arrow hitting home. The Easterling threw up his hands—the unlucky flask still clutched in one—turned on a heel and slowly dropped. The baron sprinted forward and was already past the dead man when a muffled cry sounded from the fire—the sergeant's scimitar slammed into one of the three men lying to the north of the fire, and the silence immediately shattered into a thousand screaming, howling shards.

Haladdin followed his orders by circling the camp, staying outside the circle of light and yelling in different voices: "Surround them, guys, let no sumbitch escape!" and suchlike.

Instead of scattering, the sleep-addled mercenaries instinctively stayed by the fire. On the southern approach Tangorn hit three of them; one immediately folded, clutching his stomach, and the baron snatched his sword—a wide and, Tulkas be praised, straight one—tossing away the scimitar he had to use initially. The light of the fire fell on his face, and the two remaining Easterlings abruptly dropped their weapons and ran off, screaming: "*Gheu*, *gheu*!" (a kind of vampire into which unburied dead are supposed to turn). Surprised, Haladdin was slow to open up on them and apparently missed both—in any event, they vanished into the darkness. In the commotion Tzerlag had wounded another 'northern' Easterling and was now calling out from the side: "Hey, Eloar, you coward, where are you?

I came to you to exact the blood-price of Teshgol!"

"I'm here, you spawn of Morgoth," a scornful voice replied, "Come over, I'll scratch you behind the ears!" and, addressing his troops now: "No panic, carrion eaters! There're only three of them, we'll do them like babies! Kill the slanted-eyes, he's the chief, and stay away from

their archer!"

The Elf appeared beside the fire on the right—tall, golden-haired, clad in light leather armor—his every move and every feature conveying a bewitching impression of sinuous deadly power. He resembled his sword—a thin shimmering ray of bluish starlit ice, the very look of it sent shivers through Haladdin. Tzerlag swung his scimitar with a hoarse cry—a feint to the face and an immediate right arc to the knee; Eloar parried the blow casually, and even a field medic (second class) knew right away that the sergeant has bitten off more than he could chew. The master of stealth and infiltration has met a master of the sword, and the only question now was whether he'd be finished off in two or three thrusts. Tangorn understood it best, so he raced across the fifteen yards separating him from the fight in a flash and laid into the Elf from the left, yelling at the haphazardly retreating scout: "Cover my back, dumbass!"

A professional at work (no matter what profession) is always fascinating to watch, and here there were two pros of the highest caliber. Too bad that all of the few spectators were too busy with their own affairs to admire the show—mostly they were trying to kill each other, which takes a certain amount of concentration. Nevertheless both partners put their all into their work, their tightly choreographed moves fitting precisely in the gaps of the deadly lace being crocheted by their shining blades. Tangorn's remark about covering his back was quite *a propos*—the sergeant immediately had to take on the two remaining Easterlings, one of whom was thankfully lame. Haladdin, armed only with a bow, was under strict orders not to get into the melee or even get out of the dark; firing on that tangle of friend and foe would be sheer madness, so he milled around the edges looking for a good target.

In a short while it became obvious that Tangorn was winning. Although his sword was a good three inches shorter, he managed to pink his opponent twice, in the right arm and above the knee. It is known that the Elves do not handle blood loss well, and Eloar's thrusts were losing their swift precision with every moment; the baron crowded him, calmly waiting for the right moment for the decisive blow, when something inexplicable happened. The Elvish blade suddenly wavered and pointed aside, opening up Eloar's trunk, and, lightning-fast, the Gondorian's blade immediately struck him in the lower chest. Haladdin swallowed involuntarily, expecting the blade to come out of the Elf's back steaming with blood—no mail could have

stopped that thrust, let alone leather armor. But Tangorn's blade bounced off the leather as if it was enchanted, and the Elf, who clearly expected just that, grabbed his sword with both hands and immediately delivered a terrible hacking top-down blow. The baron could neither evade nor parry. He only had time to drop to one knee and catch Eloar's sword with his—'edge against edge;'[29] shoddy Eastern steel shattered like glass, and the Elvish blade went into his thigh by almost a third. Tangorn managed to roll away from the next, pinning blow, but the Elf caught up with him in one stride and . . . And that was when Haladdin, figuring that he had nothing to wait for any more, let fly.

Later he realized that he had performed an impossible feat. The doctor had never been a good shot with a bow, and knew nothing of running shots, especially at a moving target, and especially since Tzerlag and the two Easterlings he was fighting were between him and Eloar. But the fact remains: he had shot without aiming and his arrow hit Eloar right in the eye, so that the Elf died, as the saying goes, "before his body hit the ground."

CHAPTER 12

The fire was almost out by then, but the fight went on in the dark. Both Easterlings kept attacking Tzerlag non-stop; twice did Haladdin fire on them when they broke off for a moment, and twice—for shame!—he missed. Finally the lame Easterling let another thrust through; dropping the sword, he fell down to his knees and crawled away, dragging the wounded leg and moaning. Haladdin almost let him go—plenty more to deal with—but was lucky enough to notice that the man had crawled up to one of the packs and has already fished out a bow; reaching into his own quiver, he found only one arrow and shivered. They both aimed at once, but the doctor's nerves failed and he let fly and jumped sideways, hearing the deadly hiss pass a foot and a half left of his stomach. The Easterling was less lucky: after his shot he could not evade and was now lying flat on his back with Haladdin's arrow under the collarbone. Meanwhile Tzerlag managed to trick his opponent into opening up and struck him in the neck; the Orocuen's face was now covered with sticky droplets, and his arm was fairly dripping. So, is that all of them? Victory, dammit . . .

Haladdin lost no time throwing more wood into the fire; then he sat so as not to block the light and cut open Tangorn's sticky pant leg with a single practiced movement. There was quite a lot of blood, but not too much for such a deep wound. At least the main thigh artery is intact; thank the One that Elvish swords are so narrow, like a third of the Easterling width.

All right, a tourniquet . . . now a tampon . . . The sergeant went around the campsite, finished off the two Easterlings that showed signs of life, and crouched beside the field medic.

"Whaddya say, doctor?"

"Well, could've been worse. The bone is intact, so are most sinews, as far as I can see, as are the main blood vessels. Hand me that rag."

"Here you go. Can he walk?"

“Are you kidding?”

“Then,” the sergeant got up wearily and for some reason carefully shook the sand from his knees, “it’s all over, guys. Two of them got away, and there’s no sense in chasing them in this dark. They’ll make that highway outpost before dawn, there’s no way they can get lost—just hurry north along the edge of the *hamada*. Soon as it dawns, they’ll be back with a dragnet search, get it?”

Tangorn suddenly raised himself on an elbow; Haladdin realized with horror that he had been fully conscious while they were busy with his wound. The firelight clearly showed the baron’s face, shining with sweat, but his voice was just as steady, even if a little hoarse:

“Don’t worry, guys. After all, I was supposed to be dead two days ago; were I to play this round again, I’d use this break in the same way . . .” With those words he pulled down his collar, baring the carotid artery. “So, Sergeant, just do it: one-two, and all set. I’d really rather not be stuck in the sand again. Then get away, and good luck to you both. Too bad that our acquaintance had been so short, but that’s life.”

“Baron, I’m a simple man,” Tzerlag answered calmly, “and I’m used to doing things by the book. The Field Manual, paragraph forty-two, says clearly that the ‘strike of mercy’ is allowed only when there’s an immediate danger of the wounded man falling into the foe’s hands. When such a danger appears—tomorrow, say—then we’ll discuss it.”

“Quit fooling around, Sergeant! Why the hell would you doom all three of us, when you won’t save me anyway?”

“Quiet in the ranks! We came here together and we’ll leave together; the rest is the One’s will. Doctor, check the Elf’s pack, maybe he has a medkit there?”

Haladdin called himself an idiot; he should have thought to check. What’s he got in there?

All right, an excellent bow and a quiver with thirty arrows, each with a leather sheath on the point, so they must be poisoned; a wonderful weapon, I’ll have it for myself. A coil of elvenrope: weighs half a pound, takes up a pint of space, a hundred feet long, can hold three *mûmakil*; this’ll come in handy. Elvish bread and a flask of Elvish wine, which isn’t wine at all; wonderful, the baron could use some right away. A purse with gold and silver coins, probably to pay the Easterlings since the Elves supposedly don’t use money; we’ll keep that, can’t have too much money. Writing implements and some notes, written in runes . . . damn, can’t make out anything in the dark; all

right, if we live, we'll read them. Oh, here it is, the One be praised! Having opened the medkit, Haladdin was stunned: it had everything he could think of, and all of the best quality. Antiseptic—spider webs covered with gray-green spots of healing lichen; analgesic—little balls of dehydrated Khand purple poppy juice; coagulant—powdered mandrake root from the high meadows of the Misty Mountains; stimulant—cola nuts from Harad's swampy jungles; tissue regenerator—a brown resin-like substance capable of mending a broken bone or a trophic sore in five days; plus much more he had neither time nor need to discern right then. Just let Tzerlag figure out how to throw the pursuit off track, and he'll have the baron in good shape in no more than a week.

In the meantime the Orocuen was going through the Easterlings' packs in search of flasks and rations—in their position another ten or fifteen minutes meant nothing. What they needed was an idea; they were finished without one. So: they could go onto the *hamada*, he knew a few outcroppings nearby with suitable cracks; however, those were likely to be searched first. Hiding in the sand was not an option—with no wind, there was no way to conceal their tracks, they'd be tracked down in no time. The only thing he could think of was to head west at best possible speed, towards the mountains, and try to reach the edge of the Morgai plateau with its wind-hollowed caves, but what chance did they have of covering over thirty miles with a non-walking wounded?.. The baron, revived somewhat by a couple of good draughts of Elvish wine, interrupted his thoughts: "Sergeant, a minute of your time?

"Whatever for?" the scout was surprised. "I've already checked—dead as a snake skin."

"That's not what I mean. I keep thinking about that leather breastplate of his that a sword can't pierce. Please check whether there's anything special under it."

Tzerlag grunted, but got up from his task and went over to the dead body. Taking out his scimitar, he stuck the blade under the bottom edge of the Elf's armor and cut it open in one movement from crotch to neck, as if gutting a large fish.

"Hey, look, a coat of mail! Real strange, too, never saw one like that . . ."

"Seems to glow a little, right?"

"Right. Did you know or did you guess just now?"

"Had I known it, I wouldn't have bought his open body trick,"

Tangorn grumbled. “It’s *mithril*. I couldn’t pierce that mail, nor can anyone else in Middle Earth.”

Tzerlag cast a sharp look towards the baron—a pro saluting a pro. Haladdin came up, helped the sergeant take the precious scaly skin off the dead Elf and examined it closely.

Indeed, the metal was slightly phosphorescent, resembling a blob of moonlight, and warm to the touch. The *mithril* mail-coat weighed about a pound and was so thin that it could be rolled into an orange-sized ball; when it accidentally spilled from his fingers and pooled into a silver puddle at his feet, he thought that it would be impossible to find on a moonlit night.

“And here I’ve thought that *mithril* was a legend.”

“Well, it’s not, as you can see. I think you can buy half of Minas Tirith and all of Edoras to boot with one such mail-shirt. There’s no more than twenty in the entire Middle Earth and there’ll be no more, the secret is lost.”

“So why did he hide it under that leather fake?”

The scout responded for Tangorn: “Because only an idiot shows his trumps. Uruk-Hai the Great’s principle: if you’re weak, show strength to the foe; if you’re strong, show weakness.”[30]

“Right,” the baron nodded, “and don’t forget the Easterlings. Had those carrion-eaters known about the *mithril* mail, they’d’ve cut his throat the first night and fled south—to Umbar, say—to become rich men there. Provided they didn’t waste each other dividing the loot, of course.”

The sergeant gave a gloomy whistle. “Hot damn! So this Eloar was some kinda Elvish big shot. Which means that the Elves will turn over every stone on the *hamada* and sift every dune looking for our band, and spare neither time nor effort . . .”

He clearly pictured how it would be done, having played the role of both hunter and hunted in many a dragnet search. Most likely they’ll gather at least a hundred fifty men for the task, foot soldiers and riders, however many can be found on this stretch of the highway. First the mounted soldiers will cut off the route to Morgai and form a half-circle against the unapproachable edge of the *hamada*, while the foot soldiers will move in a dragnet from the destroyed camp, checking every desert rat hole. With this approach they won’t even need experienced trackers, the superior numbers will be enough, as usual. The whole gang will be based at the nearest outpost, the only place with a large enough well; the commander’s headquarters will be

there, too . . .

Tzerlag knew that ‘outpost’ well—a caravanserai abandoned together with the entire Old Núrnen Highway when the irrigators’ efforts have turned the Western Nürnenlands into dead salt pans. It was a large square building of clay bricks surrounded by all sorts of adobe outbuildings, with the ruins of the old one, knocked down by an earthquake, in the back, overgrown with thorn bush and serge . . . Wait a minute—those ruins will be the last place they’ll think of searching! Right, the last one—meaning that those will be searched as well, sooner or later, by elimination. Too bad, at first the idea looked pretty good . . . How about a diversion, a false trail with a sideways move . . . where? . . .

Time was slipping away like water from a torn water-skin, and suddenly the scout’s expression and posture changed subtly in a way that told Haladdin with cold certainty that the other did not see any chance of escape, either. A soft icy hand moved into Haladdin’s bowels and began leisurely sorting through them as if through freshly caught fish on the bottom of a boat. It was not soldier’s dread before a battle (he had already been through that today), but something rather different, akin to the dark irrational terror that grips a suddenly lost child. Only now did he understand that Tzerlag did not just fetch him water through the Elf-infested forest at Osgiliath, did not only carry him on his back under the nose of the sentries at Minas Morgul—no, all this time the scout had also shielded the doctor with his powerful and comforting ‘there’s a man in the house’ protective aura, and this aura was now in tatters. To be honest, Haladdin had agreed to this mission of vengeance only because he had firmly decided that it was better to be in any kind of a bind, but with Tzerlag—and had guessed wrong this time. The circle has been completed: Eloar paid for Teshgol, in a few hours they will pay for this camp . . . Then, frightened and despairing, he yelled in the Orocuen’s face:

“Are you happy now?! First-rate vengeance, still can’t get enough of it?! You paid with all of us for one Elvish bastard, may the earth swallow him and his ilk forever!”

“What did you say?” the scout echoed in a strange tone. “May the earth swallow this Elf forever?”

CHAPTER 13

Suddenly Haladdin, brought up short, beheld before him the usual Tzerlag—the one who knows what to do.

"Sorry," he mumbled guiltily, looking away.

"Whatever, it happens. Bygones. Now, try to remember exactly—you too, Baron—did that pair of Easterlings beat it before or after I took on Eloar?"

"Before, I think . . ."

"Before, Sergeant, I'm positive—bet my life on it."

"Right. So they can't possibly know that Eloar is dead or that he even fought . . . All right.

Now, doctor—can the baron walk at least a couple of miles, with crutches?"

"With crutches—yes, I think so. I'll stuff him full of analgesics . . . There will be a bad reaction afterwards."

"Do it, doctor, or he won't have any 'afterwards'. Put together the medkit, some water and those breads, nothing else. Oh, and some weapons, just in case."

A few minutes later the sergeant handed Tangorn a pair of cross-shaped crutches he had just fashioned out of shortened Easterling spears and began laying out instructions.

"We'll split now. You two will get on the edge of the *hamada* and head north . . ."

"North?! But that's where the outpost is!"

"Exactly."

"Oh, I see—do the opposite of what the foe expects?"

"You got it, doc. Listen. Don't stray from the *hamada* to the sand. If—no, when—the baron conks out, you'll have to carry him. Don't lose the crutches, hear? Watch that the wound does not reopen, or else there'll be blood drops on the stones. The most important thing for you right now is to not leave any tracks; that's easy on the *hamada*, it's all gravel.

I'll catch up with you in two, two-and-a-half hours."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll explain later, every minute counts now. Forward march, warriors!.. Wait—gimme a couple cola nuts, I could use them, too."

After seeing his comrades move off, the scout got busy. He had plenty of things to do, most of them small and easily overlooked ones. For example, he had to gather all the stuff that might come in handy later, should they survive this bind—from Elvish weapons to Tangorn's books—and bury it, carefully noting landmarks. Then to prepare his own sack—water, rations, warm cloaks, weapons—and stash it on the *hamada*. Now for the most important task.

Tzerlag's idea, prompted unexpectedly by Haladdin's outburst, was simple. Suppose that Eloar had not perished in the attack, but ran off into the desert and got lost? That would be quite likely—an Elf in a desert is like an Orocuen in a forest—and his comrades would first and foremost search for their prince (or whoever he was), and only then for the guerillas who wasted six Easterling mercenaries (no big loss). He now had to turn this preposterous supposition into certain fact.

He took moccasins off the Elf's feet and picked up the cut-up leather breastplate; saw a simple silver ring on the corpse's left hand and pocketed that, too, just in case. Then he dug a pit about two feet deep, put the corpse there and covered it with carefully smoothed sand.

By itself this is a lame trick unless you create an illusion that the sand could not possibly have been disturbed. For that, we will need another dead body, preferably with minimum damage; the sentry killed by Haladdin's arrow will do just fine. Carefully Tzerlag carried the body to the spot where he hid the Elf, slit the Easterling's throat from ear to ear and drained the blood the way hunters do with big game; then he dropped the body into the pool of blood and arranged it in a natural-looking way. It now looks obvious that the mercenary died on this spot; a normal person is not very likely to look for a body right under another one, in blood-soaked sand, unless he knows exactly what to look for.

All right, half the job is done—the Elf has disappeared, and now he will acquire a very much alive and sprightly double. The Orocuen changed into the Elf's moccasins (damn, how can they wear such boots, without a proper hard sole!) and ran south along the foot of the dune, trying to leave good tracks where the ground was harder. He had donned the Elf's slit breastplate like a vest and carried his own

indispensable desert boots in his hands. About a mile and a half from the camp the sergeant halted; he had never been a good runner, and now his heart was beating somewhere near the throat, trying to escape. The distance was already adequate; the 'Elf' will now move onto the *hamada*, where he will leave no tracks.

The scout tossed Eloar's leather armor about fifteen paces beyond the spot where the tracks ended; this will serve to confirm both the fugitive's identity and, indirectly, his course (south).

Stop and think again, he said to himself. Perhaps it's best not to leave the breastplate here at all—too obvious. All right, what would I do if I were him? I am a fugitive who's unsure of where to go next; looks like I've lost my pursuers, but now I have to wander in this terrible desert for who knows how long, and it's scarier than any human foe. It's high time to ditch everything I can to lighten the load; this thing is not that useful anyway, if I survive I can buy another one of these in any armor shop . . . Sounds reasonable? Yep. Why did I take it off now rather than earlier? Just had no time when fleeing, but now I've stopped, looked around . . . Sounds reasonable? Sure does. And why is it sliced like that? Because it won't be the friendlies that find it, but rather the enemies who're hunting me; by the way, they're certainly tracking me, so it's high time to move onto gravel. Sounds reasonable? Yeah . . .

Anyway, never think the enemy stupid, but don't assume that they're geniuses, either.

He was almost ready for the sprint back—changed into his boots and ate a bitter cola nut—when his gaze fell on the breastplate lying on the stones of the *hamada* like a cracked eggshell, and realization of an almost-made mistake drenched him in cold sweat. An eggshell—how did the Elf crack out of it? Cut it off himself? It's precisely this kind of a trifle that can blow a whole operation! All right, unlace it . . . No! I the Elf am in a hurry, I don't need the armor any more—rather, cut the cord. Now it's all set.

He jogged back along the *hamada*, heading for the barely visible glint of the dying fire, where his pack awaited. The cola filled him with a treacherous lightness, so that he had to deliberately slow down, lest his heart burst. Picking up the pack, he forced himself to rest for a few minutes and then resumed course; now he had to look out for Haladdin and Tangorn, which slowed him down. It turned out that they have covered over two miles already—an excellent pace he did not even count on. The scout saw Haladdin first—he was resting,

sitting on the ground with his expressionless bloodless face turned up towards the stars. He had been carrying the baron for the last half a mile, and now Tangorn was back on his crutches, trying doggedly to gain them another few yards.

"Have you guys polished off all of that Elvish wine?"

"No, we've left some for you."

Tzerlag scanned his comrades, estimated the remaining trip and ordered them to take cola.

He knew that tomorrow (if there was a tomorrow) their bodies would pay a nightmarish price both for this drug and for the poppy balls, but there was no other way to make the trek.

Later Haladdin realized that he could not remember any of it. He remembered clearly that the cola had not only breathed new life into his weary muscles, but also sharpened all his senses amazingly, greatly expanding their range—from the familiar constellations, which suddenly shone with a multitude of previously invisible tiny stars, to the smell of dung smoke from someone's incredibly distant fire—but he could not remember a single detail of their journey.

That memory gap ended just as suddenly as it began; the world became real once again, and reality brought back pain, and weariness so enormous that it even pushed the sense of danger somewhere to the back of his consciousness. He found himself lying flat against the ground behind a tiny ridge about thirty yards away from their desired ruins, with the massive cube of the outpost looming behind it in the predawn light.

"Maybe we should sprint?" he asked in a barest whisper.

"Like hell!" the scout hissed furiously, "see the sentry on the roof?"

"Does he see us?"

"Not yet: he's silhouetted against the grey sky, we're against dark ground. But if you move he'll definitely see you."

"But it's dawning already . . ."

"Shut up, willya? It's bad enough as it is . . ."

Suddenly the stony ground under Haladdin vibrated with a new ominous sound: a dry fast drumming which quickly congealed into a rumble resembling an avalanche. A large troop of riders was approaching along the highway, and resurgent fear was already yelling at him:

"They saw you! They're surrounding you! Run!.."—when the sergeant's calm whisper brought him back to his senses:

"Ready! On my mark—no earlier!—run as fast as you can. Take the

pack, the crutches, and the weapons; I'll take the baron. This is our one and only chance."

Meanwhile the troop had arrived at the outpost and the usual commotion ensued: cursing riders were pushing their way through the throng of milling foot soldiers, their commander was arguing with the local one, the guttural shouts of the Easterlings mingled with the Elves' alarmed trilling, the roof suddenly sported three silhouettes rather than one—and then unbelieving Haladdin heard a quiet: "Now!"

He had never run so fast in his life, never mind failing strength. He made it to the blind zone under the dilapidated wall in a flash, dropped his burden and still managed to get back to help Tzerlag, who was halfway there, lugging the baron on his back. The scout shook his head—no time, it'd take longer to switch. Faster, faster! Oh One, how much longer will those dumb sentries stare at the new arrivals—a second? three? ten? They got to the ruins, expecting an alarm any moment, and dropped to the ground immediately; Tangorn must have been in bad shape, as he did not even moan. Scraping their faces and hands on the bactrian thornbush, they scrambled into a wide crack in the wall and suddenly found themselves in an almost intact room. All its walls were whole, only the ceiling sported a large gap through which they could see the rapidly graying dawn sky; the entrance was entirely blocked with a mound of broken bricks. Only then did Haladdin realize: they've made it after all! Now they had the best hideout possible, just like a duck sitting on her eggs right under a falcon's nest.

He leaned against a wall and closed his eyes just for a moment, and immediately gentle waves carried him away, whispering: it's all over, rest for just a few minutes, you've earned them . . . up, down, up, down . . . what are these waves? Tzerlag? Why is he shaking my shoulder so furiously? Oh damn! Thanks, friend—of course I have to attend to Tangorn immediately. Nor do I have a few minutes to rest—the cola's effect will wear off soon, and then I'll just plain fall apart . . . where's that damn medkit?

CHAPTER 14

Mordor, Morgai plateau

April 21, 3019

Evening came. The molten gold of the sun was still boiling in the cauldron formed by two peaks of the Mountains of Shadow, sharp burning sparks escaping it from time to time, but a transparent purplish haze was already encroaching on the foothills colored by the sunset.

The cold blue of the sky, almost azure at its eastern end, contrasted beautifully with yellowish-pink (the color of a Khandian melon) sedimentary crags of Morgai, cut by deep ink-black gorges. The sides of the flattop clay foothills adjoining the plateau were draped in ash-gray serge and salsola, dotted here and there with splashes of red—patches of wild tulips.

Haladdin was of two minds about those flowers. Just as every tulip was beautiful individually, so did the half-acre patches they formed seem unnatural and ominous. It must have been because their color exactly matched that of bright red arterial blood when in the sun, and crimson vein blood when in the shade, like right now. Serge and tulips; ash and blood. Perhaps he would have discerned different connotations at another time.

"About a mile and a half left." Tzerlag, walking in the lead, turned to his companions and nodded towards a bright patch of green oozing out of a large dale onto the yellow clay of the foothills. "What do you say, Baron—we stop for a break now or make one final push and then settle down decent-like?"

"Guys, enough coddling me already," the Gondorian answered somewhat irritably. He could already use his leg almost normally,

although he still used crutches, and had even insisted on carrying part of the load. “I’ll never get back into normal shape that way.”

“All complaints to the doctor, please, I’ve no responsibility here. What does medicine recommend, eh?”

“Chew some cola, of course,” Haladdin quipped.

“Aw, get lost!”

The joke was indeed of doubtful quality: none of them could recall the finale of their forced march to the ruins at the outpost without shuddering. Cola does not give a body new strength, it only mobilizes the reserves it already has. Such mobilization can occur spontaneously, when a man jumps a dozen yards to save his life, or pulls a half-ton stone out of the ground with his bare hands; cola allows one to perform such feats on demand, and then comes the payback: having exhausted his reserves in a critical minute, the person turns into jelly for a day and a half, both physically and mentally.

That was exactly what happened to them that morning, right after Haladdin managed to patch up Tangorn’s thigh. The baron soon got the shakes, as the fever of his wound combined with opium withdrawal; he needed urgent help, but neither the doctor nor the scout could so much as move an eye, like beached jellyfish. Some ten hours later Tzerlag did manage to get up, but all he could do was give the wounded man the rest of the Elvish wine and cover him with all the cloaks they had; Haladdin came back to life too late to nip the baron’s illness in the bud. He did manage to prevent overall sepsis, but the wound developed a large local inflammation; Tangorn ran a fever and became loudly delirious, which was the worst part—enemy soldiers used the back of the ruins as a latrine and were constantly coming and going, so much so that the sergeant began seriously considering putting him out of his misery before he gave them all away with his mutterings.

Praise the One that this did not become necessary—by the end of the second day the Elvish antiseptics had worked, Tangorn’s fever went down and the wound started to close quickly.

The adventure was far from over, though. It turned out that, unbeknownst to their officers, the mercenaries had put up a huge vat making *araka*—a local brew made from *manna*—in one of the adjoining ruined rooms and gathered there for a drink or three every nightfall.

The companions mostly got used to the soldiers (just sit quietly as a mouse during the party in their well-isolated room), but Haladdin

vividly pictured some overzealous corporal discovering the source of the ‘water of life’ and taking the pains to examine every room around: “Hey, you three! Ten-shut, lushes! What’s your platoon? Where’re your uniforms, assholes?” Just imagine blowing it all like that . . .

Still, while hiding in the ruins was dangerous, venturing forth would have been total madness: mounted and foot patrols of Easterlings and Elves kept combing the desert, examining even fox tracks. Meanwhile a new problem arose: water shortage. They had to use too much water on the wounded man, and there was no way to replenish the stock, since there was foot traffic around the outpost well day and night. After five days the situation became critical—they had half a pint between them. The baron recalled his Teshgol adventure and gloomily mentioned frying pan and fire. What rotten luck, Haladdin thought: this is the first time in our three weeks in the desert that we’re actually thirsty, and that less than a hundred yards from a well!

Salvation came from an unexpected quarter—on the sixth day the first sandstorm of the season started. A yellow wall approached from the south, slowly extending upwards—it seemed that the desert horizon was rolling up like the ragged edge of a monstrous scroll; the sky turned ashen, and one could look at the whitish noon sun without squinting, as if it was the moon. Then the boundary between earth and sky disappeared, as if two enormous hot frying pans came together, raising myriads of grains of sand into the air between them; their mad dance lasted for more than three days. Tzerlag knew better than the others what a *samoom* was like, and offered a sincere prayer to the One for all those caught away from shelter—not even an enemy deserves such a fate. The One must have ignored the part about enemies; later they gathered from soldiers’ talk that several patrols (about twenty men in total) did not make it back to the base in time and were certainly dead. There was no more reason to search for Eloar, not even for his corpse. In the evening Tzerlag wrapped himself in the Elvish hooded cloak and finally made it to the courtyard well under the cover of the suffocating yellow fog. So when Tangorn raised a still-wet flask a few minutes later and offered a toast to the desert demons, the scout frowned doubtfully but did not object.

They left their hideout on the last night of the sandstorm, when the wind had mostly failed and did no more than drag wisps of sand along the ground, obliterating all tracks. The scout led his comrades west, to Morgai, hoping to meet nomadic Orocuens who would be bringing

their cattle there to the spring pastures, and rest a little with one of his numerous relatives.

They detoured to Eloar's camp along the way and dug up the trophies that Tzerlag had been so far-sighted to hide back then. The scout used the opportunity to check on the Elf's corpse and found it nearly fully mummified; isn't it strange that neither carrion-eaters nor worms ever touch the Elvish dead—are they poisonous or something? . . .

They started their quick march towards the mountains with the first light: to move during the day was to take a huge risk, but they had to use the short time they had when they did not have to worry about concealing their tracks. By the end of the second day the company got to the plateau, but Tzerlag had seen no nomads, and it was beginning to seriously bother him.

The dale where they camped was green because a little but talkative spring lived there. It must have been lonely and now hurried to tell its unexpected guests all the news of its tiny world: spring is late this year, so the blue irises at the third bend are not in flower yet, but yesterday it got a visit from some gazelles it knew, an old male with a couple of females . . . one could listen to this quiet melodious murmur forever. Only a man who has spent weeks in the desert drinking nothing but bitter salty water at the bottom of cattle watering holes and meager drops of tasteless *tzandoi* distillate can understand what it is like to immerse one's face into living, running water. It can only be compared to the first touch of a lover after a long separation; no wonder that the imagination of desert dwellers has no pompous Crystal Palace of Delights at the center of its Paradise, but rather a small lake under a waterfall . . .

Then they drank tea brewed to oily blackness, ceremoniously passing around their only nicked tea bowl, somehow preserved by the sergeant through all the troubles ("Real Khandian work, I'll have you know"), and now Tzerlag was unhurriedly explaining to Tangorn that green tea has a multitude of virtues, whereas the question of whether it's better than black tea is akin to the ridiculous one of whether one loves mother or father best—each has its time and place. For example, in the heat of midday . . . Haladdin was only half-listening to the discourse, just like he was listening to the murmuring of the brook behind large stones, experiencing marvelous moments of quiet happiness, kind of like . . . family happiness, perhaps?

The fire, quickly burning down salsola roots (their gray trunks

covered most of the nearby slope), cast a bright light on his comrades: the chiseled profile of the Gondorian turned towards the moon-like face of the Orocuen, who resembled some placid Eastern deity. With a sudden heartache Haladdin realized that their strange fellowship was almost over—in only a few days their paths will diverge, probably forever. The baron, once his wound heals completely, will head to the Cirith Ungol pass—he decided to make his way to Prince Faramir in Ithilien—while the sergeant and he will have to decide what to do next.

It was strange, but having gone through several potentially fatal adventures alongside Tangorn, they have not really found out anything about his former life. ("Are you married, Baron?"—"Well, that's a complicated question, can't just answer yes or no." "So where is your estate located?"—"I don't think that's important any more, no doubt it has been confiscated.") Nevertheless, with every passing day Haladdin had more and more respect, if not quite love, for this slightly ironical man of few words. Looking at the baron, for the first time he could relate to the idea of 'inborn nobility.' Another quality he could sense in Tangorn was unusual for an aristocrat—dependability, of a kind different from, say, Tzerlag's, but quite certain all the same.

Being of the third estate, Haladdin had always had a lukewarm view of aristocracy. He could never understand how one could be proud not of the achievements of one's ancestors, whether in work or war, but rather of how far one could trace their genealogy, especially since most of those "noble knights" had been nothing but lucky and ruthless highway robbers, murder their trade and betrayal their calling. Besides, the doctor had despised idlers since childhood. Still, he felt subconsciously that were the useless and immoral aristocracy to disappear, the world would irretrievably lose some of its color; most likely it would become more just, perhaps cleaner, but for sure duller, and that alone is worth something!

After all, he himself was a part of a brotherhood much more exclusive than any based on heredity; Haladdin knew with absolute certainty that he had been knighted by Someone much more powerful than the King of the Reunited Kingdom or the Caliph of Khand. Isn't it strange that almost nobody realizes how undemocratic science and art are by their very nature . . .

The sergeant interrupted his musings by suggesting they draw for the first watch. A small desert owl drifted like a giant feather some fifteen feet over their heads, its hoot reminding all the good children

to go to bed already. “You crash, guys,” Haladdin offered, “I’m going to clean up, too.” Strictly speaking, this whole evening—with a fire, however well concealed, and no sentry for a while—was a major security lapse. However, Tzerlag had judged the risk very small, since the search for Eloar has been called off and Elvish patrols do not stray far from the highway otherwise. After all, people have to relax sometime; constant vigilance can backfire, too.

The fire had died down in the meantime—salsolas produce almost no embers, turning directly into ash—and Haladdin put Tzerlag’s ‘Khandian’ bowl into the brewing pot and took it down to the stream to wash up. He had already put the clean pot down on the shore gravel and was warming fingers numb from icy water with his breath when quick flickers on the surrounding boulders told him that the fire was building up again. Who’s still up?—he wondered,—can’t see anything against the firelight . . . The black silhouette by the fire was motionless, its hands stretched towards the quickly rising orange flames. The circle of light widened smoothly, illuminating their packs, Tangorn’s crutches leaning against a boulder, and both sleeping forms . . . Both?! So who’s sitting by the fire? Suddenly the doctor realized something else: he had gone on his twenty-yard dishwashing mission without any weapons. No weapons at all, which probably had just doomed his friends.

The person sitting by the fire turned unhurriedly towards the hapless sentry and made a commanding beckoning gesture. It was clear as day that had he so desired, all three of them would have been dead by now. Haladdin made his way back to the fire in a kind of a daze, sat down opposite the black-cloaked intruder—and caught his breath as if hit with a body blow: the closely drawn cowl concealed nothing but emptiness, with two dim scarlet embers gazing intently at him from the inside. He was facing a nazgúl.

CHAPTER 15

The Nazgúl! An ancient magical order, ever surrounded by most ominous rumor. Black wraiths, supposedly in touch with the highest powers of Mordor; the miracles ascribed to them were such that no serious person would ever believe them. Nor had Haladdin believed them, but now a nazgúl was here for his soul . . . Having said that common phrase in his mind, he almost bit his tongue. Despite being a skeptic and a rationalist, Haladdin had nevertheless always known that some things are better left untouched, lest one lose his fingers . . . Suddenly he heard a voice, quiet and a little husky, with a hard-to-place accent, issuing, it seemed, not from the darkness under the hood, but from somewhere off to the side, or from above:

"Are you afraid of me, Haladdin?"

"Well, to be honest . . ."

"So say it straight: yes, I'm afraid. You see, I could have assumed . . . er . . . a more neutral form, but I've too little strength left. So please bear with me, it'll not be for long. Although it must be creepy to one unused to such things."

"Thank you," Haladdin answered gruffly, feeling his fear suddenly dissipate without a trace.

"Could you at least introduce yourself, since you know me but I don't know you?"

"Actually, you do know me, if only by hearsay: Sharya-Rana, at your service." The edge of the cowl dipped in a small bow. "To be more precise, I was Sharya-Rana in my previous life."

"Amazing!" Now Haladdin was sure that he was dreaming, and tried to behave accordingly.

"A personal conversation with Sharya-Rana himself—I would've gladly given five years of my life for that. By the way, you have a rather interesting lexicon for a Vendotenian[31] who lived more than a century ago."

"It's your lexicon, not mine." Haladdin could have sworn that for a

split second the darkness under the cowl coalesced into a smirk. “I’m simply using your words, it’s no effort for me. Although, if you prefer . . .”

“No, this is fine.” Total delusion! “But tell me, honored Sharya-Rana, they say that all the Nazgúl are former kings?”

“There are kings among us, too, as well as doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, and such. As you can see, some of us are mathematicians.”

“So is it true that after publishing *The Natural Basis of Celestial Mechanics*[32] you turned completely to theology?”

“Yes, but that, too, is all behind me, in my former life.”

“And when you leave those former lives, you simply shed your tired flesh and acquire unlimited powers and immortality?”

“No. We are long-lived, but mortal. Indeed, we are always nine—that is the tradition—but members of the Nine change. As for unlimited powers . . . it’s really an unimaginably heavy burden. We are the magic shield that had for ages protected the little oasis of Reason in which your light-minded civilization had so comfortably nestled. It is absolutely alien to the World in which we had to be born, and Middle Earth is struggling against this alien presence with all the might of its magic. When we manage to absorb a blow, we dematerialize, and then it is simply very painful; whereas when we make a mistake and a blow reaches your little world . . . What we feel then has no name in any human language: all the World’s pain, all the World’s fear, all the World’s despair is the payment for our work. If you only knew how emptiness can hurt . . .” The burning coals under the hood seemed filmed with ash momentarily. “In other words, you shouldn’t envy us our powers.”

“Forgive me,” Haladdin mumbled. “None of us even suspect . . . they tell all kind of tales about you . . . I myself thought that you’re phantoms that don’t care about the real world.”

“On the contrary, we do care a lot. For example, I’m well acquainted with your work.”

“Really?!”

“Oh yes. Congratulations: what you did the year before last with your study of nerve tissue will inaugurate a new era in physiology. Not sure that you’ll make it into a school textbook, but a university course certainly. Provided, of course, that after the recent events this world will ever have textbooks and universities.”

“Yeah?” Haladdin was doubtful. Sure, to hear this kind of praise

from Sharya-Rana himself (provided that this was, indeed, Sharya-Rana) was pleasant beyond belief, but the great mathematician seemed not so competent in a foreign subject. “I’m afraid that you’re confusing a couple of things. I did indeed achieve a few good results studying how poisons and antidotes work, but that work with nerve fibers was just a fleeting whim. A couple of cute experiments, a hypothesis that still needs a lot of checking . . .”

“I never confuse anything,” the nazgúl snapped coldly. “That little paper is the best work you have done and will ever do; at the very least, you’ve immortalized your name. I say this not because I believe it, but because I know it. We have some ways to see the future, and use them sometimes.”

“Well, sure, you must be interested in the future of science.”

“In that particular case our main interest was you rather than science.”

“Me?!”

“Yes, you. Still, not everything is clear, which is why I’m here to ask a few questions.

Most of them will be . . . rather personal, and I only ask for one thing: please answer as honestly as you think necessary, but don’t invent anything; that’d be useless anyway. And please stop looking around all the time! There are no other people for . . .”—the nazgúl paused for a moment—“at least twenty-three miles in any direction, and your friends will sleep soundly until we’re done here. So—are you ready to answer under those conditions?”

“As I understand it,” Haladdin smiled crookedly, “you can obtain my answers without my consent.”

“Yes, I can,” the nazgúl nodded, “but I will not. Not with you, anyway. The thing is, I have a certain proposition for you, so we must at least trust each other . . . Hey, do you think I’m here to buy your immortal soul?” Haladdin mumbled something unintelligible. “Oh, please—that’s complete nonsense!”

“What’s nonsense?”

“Buying a soul, that’s what. Be it known to you that a soul can be obtained as a gift, as a sacrifice, it can be lost—but it can be neither bought nor sold. It’s like love: there’s no give-and-take, otherwise it’s just not love. Besides, I’m really not that interested in your soul.”

“Really? “ Strangely, that stung. “So what interests you, then?”

“First of all, I’m interested in finding out why a brilliant scientist would quit his job, which was the meaning of his life rather than just

a livelihood, and volunteer as an army field medic."

"Well, for example, he was interested in verifying some of his ideas about how poisons work in practice. Such a wealth of data was being lost, you know . . ."

"So the Elf-wounded soldiers of the South Army were nothing but guinea pigs to you?

That's a lie! I know you like my own two hands, from your idiotic experiments on yourself to . . . Why the hell are you trying to seem more cynical than you are?"

"But the practice of medicine predisposes one to certain cynicism, especially military medicine. You know, they give this test to all novice field medics. Say that you get three wounded men: one with a belly wound, one with a serious thigh wound—open break, blood loss, shock, the works—and one with a glancing shoulder wound. You can only operate one at a time, so where do you start? Surely, all novices say, it's the belly wound. No, says the examiner. While you're busy with him, and it's nine out of ten that he's going to die anyway, the guy with the thigh wound will get complications and will at least lose his leg, and most likely die, too. So you have to start with the most serious wound among those who have a decent chance of survival—in our case, the thigh wound. As for the belly wound, well . . . give the man an analgesic and leave him to the One's will. To a normal person this must seem cynical and cruel, but at war you can only choose between bad and worse, so this is the only way. It was only in Barad-Dur that we could talk nicely, over tea and jam, about how every human life is invaluable . . ."

"Something doesn't add up here. If all your considerations are eminently practical, why did you carry the baron and risked the whole team, rather than administering the 'strike of mercy'?"

"Where's the contradiction? It's plainly obvious that you have to help your comrade to the hilt, even at the greatest risk: you save him today, he'll save you tomorrow. As for the 'strike of mercy', don't worry—were it necessary, we would've done it in the best form . . .

It used to be better in the old times, when wars were declared in advance, didn't involve peasants, and a wounded man could simply surrender. Too bad that we weren't born then, but no inhabitant of those glass-house times can cast a stone at us."

"A beautiful exposition, Field Medic, sir, but I suspect that you'd ask the sergeant to do the 'strike of mercy'. No? All right then, another question, again about practical logic. Have you considered that a

leading physiologist sitting in Barad-Dur and studying antidotes professionally could save a lot more lives than a field medic?"

"Of course I've considered it. It's just that—sometimes there are situations when a man has to do an obviously stupid thing just to retain his self-respect."

"Even if this self-respect is ultimately bought with others' lives?"

"Well . . . I'm not sure. After all, the One may have His own ideas about that."

"So you make the decision, but the One bears responsibility for it? Wonderful! Haven't you told the same thing to Kumai in almost the exact same words I've just used?

Remember? You had no chance, of course—once a Troll decides something, that's the end of it. "We may not sit out the battle which will decide the fate of the Motherland"—and so an excellent mechanic becomes an army engineer, Second Class. A truly priceless acquisition for the South Army! In the meantime it seems to you that Sonya is looking at you strangely: sure, her brother is fighting at the front while her bridegroom is cutting up rabbits at the University like there's not a war on. So then you can think of nothing better than to follow Kumai (truly it is said that stupidity is contagious), so that the girl is bereft of both brother and bridegroom. Am I right?"

For some time Haladdin stared at the flames dancing over the coals (strange thing: the fire keeps burning, although the nazgúl doesn't seem to be adding any wood). He had the distinct feeling of having been exposed in something untoward. What the hell!

"In other words, doctor, your head is a total mess, if you pardon the expression. You can make decisions, no question about that, but can't complete a single logical construct; rather, you slide into emotionalism. However, in our case this is actually not bad."

"What's not bad?"

"You see, should you decide to accept my proposition, you will thereby take on an opponent that is immeasurably more powerful than you are. However, your actions are frequently totally irrational, so he'll have a hell of a time guessing what you'll do. It is quite possible that this is our only hope."

CHAPTER 16

"That's interesting," Haladdin said after thinking a little. "Go ahead, tell me your proposition, I'm intrigued."

"Wait a bit, all in good time. First of all, be aware that your Sonya is alive and well, and even relatively safe. So you can actually take her and go to Umbar or Khand to continue your studies; after all, it is precisely the accumulation and preservation of knowledge that . . ."

"Enough already!" Haladdin grimaced. "I'm not leaving here for anywhere . . . that's what you want to hear, right?"

"Right," Sharya-Rana nodded. "However, a man should have a choice, and for men like you it's especially important."

"Ri–i-i-ight, just so that later you can shrug and say: 'You got into this crap all by yourself, buddy—no one was prodding you with a sharp stick!' What if I do, indeed, tell you to get lost and beat it to Umbar—what then?"

"Well, you won't. Haladdin, please don't think that I'm daring you. There will be a lot of work to be done here, very hard and mortally dangerous work, so we will need everybody: soldiers, mechanics, poets . . ."

"Poets? Why those?"

"Seemingly, those will be needed no more than all the rest. We will have to save everything that can be saved on this Earth, but first and foremost—the memory of who we are and who we were. We must preserve it like embers under the ashes—in the catacombs or in the diaspora—and poets are indispensable for that."

"So I will take part in those rescues?"

"No, not you. I have to tell you a sad secret: all our current activity in Mordor can't really change anything. We have lost the most important battle in the history of Arda—the magic of the White Council and the Elves overcame the magic of the Nazgúl—and now the green shoots of reason and progress, bereft of our protection, will be weeded out throughout Middle Earth. The forces of magic will

reconfigure this world to their liking, and henceforth it will have no room for technological civilizations like that of Mordor. The three-dimensional spiral of history will lose its vertical dimension and collapse into a closed circle; centuries and ages will pass, but the only things to change will be the names of the kings and the battles they win. As for Men . . . Men will remain pitiful deficient creatures who will not dare raise their eyes to look at the masters of the world—the Elves; it's only in a changing world that a mortal can turn his curse into a blessing and rise above the Immortals through generational change. In two or three decades the Elves will turn Middle Earth into a well-tended tidy lawn, and Men into cute pets; they will deprive Man of a very small thing—his right to Create, and grant him a myriad of plain and simple pleasures instead . . . Actually, Haladdin, I can assure you that most people will make this trade without remorse."

"'Most people' don't concern me, they can take care of themselves. So the Elves are our real enemies, rather than the Gondorians?"

"The Gondorians are victims just as you are, we're not talking about them here. Strictly speaking, the Elves are not your enemies, either, not in the usual sense; can you call Man the enemy of deer? Certainly Man hunts deer—so what's the big deal about that? He also guards them in royal forests, sings the majestic strength of the old buck, gets sentimental looking in does' eyes, feeds an orphaned fawn from his hand . . . So the current cruelty of the Elves is a temporary measure; in a sense, it's forced. When the world is static, they will for sure tread lighter; after all, the capability to create is undoubtedly a deviation from the norm, so such people will be treated, rather than killed as they are now. Nor will the Immortals have to get their own hands dirty—there will be plenty of human volunteers . . . there already are . . . By the way, this future Elvish world will be pretty good in its own way—a stagnant pond is certainly less aesthetically pleasing than a stream, but it grows such wonderful water poppies . . ."

"I see. So how can we prevent them from turning Middle Earth into this . . . swamp with beautiful water poppies?"

"I'll explain, but I have to start at the very beginning. It's a pity that you're not a mathematician, the explanation would've been easier . . . just ask me right away if something is unclear, all right? Now: every inhabited World has two components; really, they are two different worlds, which have their own laws but co-exist in a single 'wrapper'. They are customarily called 'physical' and 'magical', although those

designations are somewhat arbitrary, in that the magical world is quite real and, in that sense, physical, while the physical one has certain properties which are not reducible to physics and can be considered magical. In the case of Arda these are the Middle Earth and Aman, inhabited by their sentient populations of Men and Elves. These worlds are parallel, but their inhabitants perceive the boundary between them as a temporal rather than a spatial one: every human knows that there are no wizards, dragons, or goblins now, but his grandparents have for sure seen some—and this persists in every generation. Nor is this a figment of imagination; rather, it's a natural consequence of the two-part structure of inhabited Worlds. I could show you the appropriate mathematical models, but you won't be able to make heads or tails out of them. Are you with me so far?"

"Yes, quite."

"Very well. For some unknown reason (think of it as the One's strange whim), in our Arda, and only in our Arda, it is possible to have direct contact between the physical and magical worlds, allowing its inhabitants to interact in real space-time—or, to put it simply, to shoot at each other. The existence of this interspatial 'corridor' is provided by the so-called Mirror. Some time ago it had arisen in the magical world—arisen, rather than was made—together with the seven Seeing Stones, the *palantíri*, and can't exist without them, since both the Mirror and the *palantíri* are the product of separation of the same substance, namely the Eternal Fire . . ."

"Wait, isn't a *palantír* a device for long-distance communication?"

"Yes, it can be used for that. You can also drive nails with one . . . actually, no, that'd be inconvenient, they're round and slippery. But they'd make great fishing weights! You see, each of those magical objects has innumerable properties and uses, but in this world we don't even have names for most of them. Which is why they're used for all sorts of nonsense: *palantíri* for communication, the Mirror for primitive future-telling . . ."

"Some primitive nonsense!"

"I assure you, this is total nonsense compared to some of its capabilities. Besides, the Mirror portrays not the objective future of Arda, but various alternatives—yes, alternatives—of the individual fate of the gazer. You, being an experimental scientist, should know that any measuring device affects the state of whatever is being measured, and here the 'device' is a person, with free will and everything."

“Well, whatever you say, predicting the future is impressive.”

“You’re so fixated on this prediction business,” Sharya-Rana said in annoyance. “What about violating the law of causality[33]—does that impress you?”

“The law of what?!”

“Causality—yes, the very one. All right, we’ll get to the law of causality yet. So far, what you need to remember is that in general the *palantíri* control space and the Mirror controls time. Next: the two worlds of Arda are asymmetric in all parameters, so this ‘channel’ between them works very selectively. For example, many magical creatures are quite at home here, but only a few mortals have ever managed to visit Aman, and for a very short time at that. These people are called wizards in Middle Earth.”

“Are the Nazgúl wizards, too?”

“Of course. To continue, this asymmetry has been balanced by a very important fact. As severely limited as the wizards’ capabilities are in that neighboring world, it so happened that they nevertheless managed to obtain the Mirror and the *palantíri* and drag the whole lot over here, to Middle Earth. As a result, the Elves can settle in Middle Earth while Men can’t settle in Aman, but control over the ‘channel’ between the worlds remains in the hands of wizards, who are of this world. This enables contact, but disables any colonization. As you can see, the One had set up a well thought-out system.”

“Right—the twin-key principle.”[34]

“Precisely. The only thing He had not anticipated was that some of the wizards were so taken with Aman that they decided to mold Middle Earth in its form and image at any cost; they constitute the White Council. The others, who later formed the Order of the Nazgúl, were emphatically opposed: what sane person would destroy his own world to build a bad copy of another one on its ruins? Both sides had their reasons, both sincerely wanted to make the people of Middle Earth happier . . .”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“Right. When the White Council and the Nazgúl clashed over the future of Middle Earth, both sides quickly found natural allies. We began helping out the dynamic civilizations of Central Middle Earth—Mordor first and foremost, and Umbar and Khand to some extent—while the White Council relied on the traditional societies of the North and West, and the Enchanted Forests, of course. At first the Whites were completely sure of a quick victory, since they happened to

possess both the Mirror and most of the *palantíri* when the war broke out. They have, for all intents and purposes, opened Middle Earth to Elvish expansion in order to mobilize all forces of magic against Mordor, both local and foreign. The only thing the white wizards hadn't foreseen was that our way, the way of Freedom and Knowledge, was so attractive that lots of people—the best in Middle Earth—came to serve as the magical shield of the Mordorian civilization. One after another they dematerialized under the blows of Western magic, but others took their place. In other words, Haladdin, your peace has been dearly bought. There is no higher price."

"Why didn't we know any of that?"

"Because it didn't really concern you. The only reason I mention it now is to ask you to remember that when you join the struggle, you will be fighting for them, too . . . But this is just sentimental icing on the cake. To make a long story short: the situation was highly unfavorable, but we have managed, at the cost of all those sacrifices, to shield the Mordorian civilization, and it had made it out of the crib. Another fifty, maybe seventy years, and you would have completed the industrial revolution, and then no one would've been able to touch you. From that point on the Elves would've dwelled quietly in their Enchanted Forests, not getting in anyone's way, while the rest of Middle Earth would've by and large gotten onto your path. And so, realizing that they were about to lose the contest, the wizards of the White Council decided on a monstrous move: to unleash a war of total destruction against Mordor, to involve the Elves directly, and to pay them with the Mirror."

"They paid the Elves with the Mirror?!"

"Yes. It was absolute madness; the head of the White Council himself, Saruman, a foresighted and prudent man, fought this plan to the last, and quit the Council when it was adopted after all. The Council is now headed by Gandalf, the architect of the 'final solution to the Mordorian problem.'"

"Wait, which Saruman is that? The king of Isengard?"

"The same. He formed a temporary alliance with us, since he understood right away what those games with the denizens of the Enchanted Forests mean to Middle Earth. He used to warn the White Council for the longest time: 'Using the Elves in our struggle against Mordor is akin to burning down the house to get rid of roaches.' And that's exactly how it came out. Mordor lies in ruins, and the Mirror is in Lórien, with the Elvish Queen Galadriel; soon the Elves will brush

the White Council away like crumbs off the table and rule Middle Earth as they see fit. Remember I mentioned the law of causality? The main difference between the magical and our worlds is that this law doesn't hold there; or, rather, its sway is very limited. When the Elves figure out the Mirror's properties (which will be difficult even for them, since they've never encountered it before) and understand that it can control the law of causality, they will immediately and forever turn our world into a dirty backwater of Aman."

"So, this means . . . there is no way out?" Haladdin asked quietly.

"There is one. So far, there is. The only way to save Middle Earth is to completely isolate it from the magical world. To do that, Galadriel's Mirror must be destroyed."

"Can we do it?" the doctor shook his head dubiously.

"We—if you mean the Nazgúl—cannot. Not anymore. But you, Field Medic Second Class Haladdin, can. You, and no other," unearthly cold wafted at him from Sharya-Rana's pointing arm, "are capable of shattering the very foundation of the Elves' magical power and preserving this world as it is."

CHAPTER 17

Silence fell. Stupefied, Haladdin stared at the nazgúl, awaiting clarification.

“Yes, you’ve heard right, doctor. You see, right now, all across Mordor, hundreds of wonderful people—including your Sonya—are carrying out our common task. They fight as guerillas, transport children to safe places, set up secret repositories of knowledge for the future . . . They risk their lives every hour in the ruins of Barad-Dur, abase themselves in occupation administration, die under torture. They do everything humanly possible, not thinking of themselves and not expecting any gratitude from anyone. But it is up to you, Haladdin —you alone!—to determine whether all these sacrifices will be a down payment on a victory or merely an extension of agony. I would love to relieve you of this terrible burden, but I can’t. It’s yours; so it comes out.”

“No, this has to be some kind of mistake!” He shook his head vigorously in protest.

“Something got confused somewhere. You say ‘shatter the Elvish magic’, but I don’t know the first thing about magic! I have never had any talent for magic; I can’t do even the simplest trick—find a hidden object with a frame.”[35]

“You don’t even know how right you are! A complete lack of any magical ability such as yours is incredibly rare and almost impossible. You see, Nature had deprived you of a sword, but gave you a wonderful shield instead: a man who is totally incapable of magic is also totally immune to others’ magic. The Elves are in such power now that they can easily wipe out any wizard, but they’ll have to deal with you by the rules of the rational world, where your chances are more equal. Plus this tendency of yours towards unpredictable emotional decisions is also no walk in the park . . . Frankly, the chances of success are very small, but in all other alternatives there are none.”

“But please see that I can’t do work that I don’t understand!” He

was in despair. “That I’ll die is not such a big deal, but to doom the efforts of so many people? No, I can’t! Besides—you’ve just said that Sonya is safe and I can take her to Umbar, and now it seems like she’s working for you, too? How so?”

“Don’t worry about Sonya, she’s splendid. I saw her in Barad-Dur back then. The city burned for several days straight, the Men of the West couldn’t even enter it, and there were numerous people in the basements—the children, the wounded . . . She was searching for people under the ruins and did totally impossible things sometimes. You must know she has this gift of absolute fearlessness; she can be afraid for someone else, but never for herself.

By the way, have you noticed that women have this gift incomparably more often than men?

Understand this: *nothing can happen to a person who is not afraid*; it is not for naught that her medical squad considers her a living talisman. This is real ancient magic, not some cheap spell, please trust a professional. She is now in one of our hideouts in the Ash Mountains—thirty-six children and Mama Sonya. That place is as safe as can be.”

“Thank you.”

“Not at all, she’s in her rightful place. Listen, Haladdin, I think I’ve scared you too much with all this talk. Don’t look so downcast! Please summon your healthy cynicism and look at this business as a purely scientific, theoretical challenge. A mental exercise, you know—putting together a puzzle.”

“You should know,” Haladdin responded gloomily, “that a scientist won’t lift a finger until he’s certain that he has all pieces of the puzzle and that it actually has a solution. Searching a dark room for a black cat that’s not even there is not for us, that’s philosophers’ business.”[36]

“I can reassure you that there definitely is a cat in our dark room, the problem is how to catch it. Here, then, is the puzzle. Given: a large magical crystal, code name ‘Mirror,’ located smack in the middle of the Enchanted Forest, in Lórien, at Elf Queen Galadriel’s.

Problem: to destroy said crystal. Care to give it a try?”

“Parameters of this crystal?” Haladdin joined the game without much desire.

“Ask away!”

“Eh . . . Well, to begin with: shape, size, weight?”

“It is shaped like a lens. Dimensions: one-and-a-half yards in diameter and a foot thick.

Weight: about a thousand pounds, not for one man to lift. Besides, it mostly likely has a metal setting."

"All right . . . Mechanical strength?"

"Absolute, just like that of the *palantíri*."

"What do you mean—'absolute'?"

"I mean literally absolute—impossible to break."

"Whoa! Then how?"

"This information," the nazgúl's voice was suddenly metallic and officer-like, "is already in your possession, so please work your memory."

Damn, just what I need . . . get lost, willya? Wait, what was that he'd said about the Mirror and the *palantíri*?

"The Mirror and the *palantíri* arose as product of separation of the Eternal Fire, so the same Fire would destroy them, right?"

"Bravo, Haladdin! Precisely so, and in no other manner."

"Wait a second, where am I supposed to obtain this Eternal Fire?"

"The entire Orodruin is at your service."

"Are you kidding? Where's Orodruin and where's Lórien?"

Sharya-Rana spread his hands: "This is precisely your riddle."

Haladdin shook his head. "Yeah, no joke . . . So: one, sneak into the Elvish capital; two, charm their queen; three, steal a thousand-pound medallion; four, drag it to Orodruin . . . all right, I won't count lugging it up to the crater as a separate task . . . and I have how long to do all that?"

"Three months," the nazgúl said drily. "A hundred days, to be precise. If you're not done by the first of August, you can wind up the operation—it won't help anyone anymore."

To appease his conscience, Haladdin had actually tried solving the riddle, wracking his mind for two or three minutes—no way, no how! —and finally asked in relief: "All right, Sharya-Rana, I give up. What's your solution?"

"I don't have one," the other replied calmly, turned what used to be a face towards the stars and muttered with a strange sadness: "How time flies . . . less than an hour left . . ."

"What do you mean, you don't have one?" Haladdin finally managed to get out. "Didn't you say that there is a solution?"

"True, there is, but I don't know what it is. Even if I knew, I would not have been able to divulge it to you, as that would immediately doom the entire enterprise. The rules of this game stipulate that you have to travel this road all by yourself. This doesn't mean that you

have to go it alone; you're free to accept any technical help from other people at your discretion, but all the decisions have to be yours alone. As for myself, I stand ready to provide any information that can be useful in your mission, but no concrete hints; consider me a sort of an *Encyclopedia of Arda*, but bear in mind that you have less than an hour."

"Any information?" Curiosity overcame all his other feelings.

"Any non-magical information," the nazgúl corrected. "Anything your heart desires: *mithril* technology, Elvish dynasties, the Ring of Power, Mordor's sleeper agents in Minas Tirith and Umbar—ask away, Haladdin."

"Wait a minute—you said 'non-magical' and just mentioned the Ring of Power! How so?"

"Listen," Sharya-Rana remarked in some annoyance, looking at the sky again, "you only have about fifty minutes. Honestly, that stupid business involved no magic and has no bearing on your mission!"

"That's a concrete hint!"

"*Touché*! All right, if you can spare the time—listen. It's up to you now to decide what's important and what isn't."

He regretted his curiosity, as he understood that those memories were rather unpleasant to Sharya-Rana. But the nazgúl had already begun his tale, and once again it seemed to Haladdin that the darkness under the cowl hid a ghostly sarcastic grin.

"This had been one of our many attempts to split the Western coalition, which, unfortunately, did no good. We made a luxurious ring—the goldsmiths had a lot of fun—spread a rumor that it's supposed to confer power over the entire Middle Earth, and shipped it over Anduin. The hope was that the Gondorians and the Rohirrim would battle each other over this little gift. Well, those did indeed swallow the bait, hook, line, and sinker, but Gandalf figured out whose idea it was right away. To save the Western coalition from falling apart, he tricked them all: got to the Ring first, but rather than keep it, caused it to be thoroughly lost.

"He hid it really well; our intelligence service took more than two years to pick up the scent.

It turned out that the Ring was in the Shire, a backwater in the far North-West: whitewashed shutters, rose gardens, a pig in the mud in the middle of the main street . . . So what to do?

Neither the Gondorians nor the Rohirrim have ever stepped foot into this Shire. Steal the Ring and drop it off at Anduin again—our

involvement would've been clear as day. So someone had a good idea: to pretend that we're seeking the Ring, too, and thus dislodge its lazy owner. But in our conceit we Nazgúl decided to do this ourselves, quick and easy, here today, gone tomorrow . . . this was way below our pay grade, to put it mildly, but a dilettante is always a dilettante, no matter how smart he is. Two real spies would've done a lot more good than our entire Order.

"Strictly speaking, the Nazgúl can take any shape they want, but back then we used our real look, just like now. Take yourself—you're an educated man, and still you paled a little, so can't blame the local yokels. To make a long story short, we dressed to impress and paraded in a few local towns, just about shouting from the rooftops: 'Where's the keeper of the Ring of Power? Get him over here!' It's a good thing they don't even have police over there, let alone a counter-intelligence service; the professionals would've realized immediately that this was not at all how you catch someone. Well, those village simpletons—the Ring-keeper and his friends—took it all for real, so we herded them East slowly, just scaring them once in a while so they wouldn't hang around the taverns for too long. In the meantime, our people led Gondorian Prince Boromir to them. The whole operation was for his sake, really: that guy was ready to make soup from his father's bones to get the Ring of Power. So when the prince joined the party, together with a bunch of other people, we thought it all set—no more need for us to shadow that gang and scare them. Now our ring will sail clear to Minas Tirith with no problems . . . We tasked a company of Orocuens to escort the Ring and forgot all about it—and paid for it. Sometime later our people watching the Anduin spotted a funeral boat, checked it—surprise! Boromir! Apparently they had some sort of a brawl in the company, and someone bested him. No one has seen the Ring since then, nor has anyone looked; whatever for?

"So, to sum it up, we've screwed this one up royally, no question, I'm still ashamed to remember . . . So, doctor, have you been amused by this morality tale? Are you even listening?"

"My sincere apologies, Sharya-Rana!" Haladdin finally tore his fixed gaze from the orange embers and suddenly smiled. "This story gave me an idea somehow. I may have found a solution to this puzzle . . . or at least an approach to a solution. Tell me—by the rules of this game, may I share it with you, or would it be a hint?"

CHAPTER 18

"No," Sharya-Rana said after some thought. "I mean—no, it won't be a hint. Tell me your solution."

"Please tell me about the *palantíri* first, all right?"

"As you please. Those, too, are magical crystals; with your magical limitations they can only interest you as means of communication. Anything surrounding one crystal can be transmitted to another—images, sounds, smells. Let me stress: it is the phenomenon itself that gets transmitted, rather than information about it. How this happens is rather difficult to understand, nor do you need to. Thoughts and feelings don't get transmitted, that's a fairy tale. A *palantír* can work in sending, receiving, or two-way mode; in principle, it is possible to set up contact between more than two crystals, but that is very complicated."

"What do they look like?"

"A ball of smoky crystal, about the size of a child's head."

"So they're portable, at least, that's a big plus. Then here's the idea. The seven palantíri and the Mirror are a complementary pair and can't exist without each other, right? So instead of the Mirror we can drop the *palantíri* into Orodruin, with the same result! You will tell me where to look for them; would that be legal?"

"Hmm . . . Ingenious! Unfortunately, this is technically impossible, at least as far as I can see. The thing is, you need all seven to succeed, and some *palantíri* are quite out of reach.

We have only one in Mordor, that one's not a problem. I surmise that Aragorn grabbed Denethor's *palantír*, and Gandalf has Saruman's. Those are at least within theoretical reach, so that's three. But then there's the *palantír* of the Western Elves; their ruler Kirden keeps it in the tower of Elostirion in Emyn Beraid—how is that any better than Lórien, it's only further away? Finally, there is the *palantír* of Osgiliath, tossed into Anduin ages ago—who knows where it is by now?—and the two of Arnor, from Annúminas and the tower of Amon

Súl; those are in a sunken ship at the bottom of the Bay of Forochel. I can give you exact coordinates if you wish, but I really don't see how that will help you."

Haladdin felt the tips of his ears burn. Impudent whelp—to think that you could solve in three minutes a puzzle that the greatest mathematical mind of all time must have been pondering for many years . . . He was incredibly surprised to hear Sharya-Rana say:

"Great job, Haladdin. Honestly, only now am I somewhat at peace. This means that you have actually started working on this puzzle, and nothing will stop you now."

"Yes, you've suckered me in quite deftly, no question," he grumbled. "By the way, where is our *palantír*, of Mordor? Just in case."

"Try guessing. Tzerlag must've taught you a few things over the last month, no?"

"Some guess! At least tell me when it was hidden?"

"Right after the Battle of Cormallen, when it became clear that Mordor will fall."

"All right . . ." He thought for a couple of minutes. "So. To begin with, where it certainly can't be is all your hideouts, guerilla bases, and the like. Should I explain?"

"Not to me. Next?"

"No way you'd hide it in Barad-Dur, for all of its wonderful hiding places, because of the coming siege and fires."

"That's logical."

"To move it abroad is dicey. First, it was precisely at that time, right after Cormallen, that the roads were at their riskiest; second, who knows what the local agents will do after the defeat? Although it would be tempting to hide it in Minas Tirith!"

"Well . . . All right. Accepted."

"Caves, abandoned mines, old wells are out: there are a lot more accidental observers around such places than is commonly known. For the same reason, can't sink it under a buoy in some pretty cove of Núrnen—the fishermen are curious folks."

"Right again."

"In other words, I would bury it in some faraway, unpopulated, and undistinguished location, in the mountains or in the desert, noting the landmarks really well. Of course, this carries its own risk—in a few years the boulder under which it's been hidden might wind up in the river together with the entire bank after a landslide . . . Actually, wait

—there's a better alternative! Abandoned ruins with real hiding places, far from human habitation, where a normal person would never go, like Minas Morgul or Dol Guldur."

"Yeah . . ." drawled the nazgúl, "you're real sharp. Dol Guldur it is. I took it there myself.

Used a glider and walked back, as no one else was there to operate the catapult. The *palantír* is in 'receive' mode and so is invisible to the other crystals; it's in the hiding place behind a six-sided stone in the rear wall of the fireplace in the Great Hall. It's in a pouch made of sackcloth woven with silver, so it can be handled safely. The handles opening the hiding place appear when two stones are pushed simultaneously: a rhombic one next to it and the lower left one in the fireplace's arch, which can only be reached with one's foot.

Remember this, I won't repeat it."

"Could I use this *palantír*?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Well, you said that it's a magical crystal and I'm not supposed to use any magic."

"The crystal is magical," Sharya-Rana explained patiently, "but the communication is not.

For example, if you use a *palantír* as a sinker, the fish you catch will not be magical."

"Then can you tell me how to use one?"

"Who are you going to contact—Gandalf? Although that's your business . . . It's not complicated, actually. Are you familiar with optics?"

"Yes, from a university course."

"Then I'd better keep it simple. There are two constantly glowing orange sparks within a *palantír*. The line connecting them is the main optical axis of the crystal . . ."

Haladdin listened to the explanation quietly, marveling at how the nazgúl was neatly slotting all that complex and voluminous information into his memory. Then, weirder things began.

The tempo of Sharya-Rana's explanations kept increasing (or, perhaps, time was slowing—he would not have been surprised by that now), and although at any given moment Haladdin's brain perceived only one phrase—a glyph completely out of any context—he was absolutely certain that whenever necessary all this information about guerillas in the Mountains of Shadow, palace intrigues in Minas Tirith, topography of Lórien, passwords to contact Mordor resident spies in

all the capitals of Middle Earth, and all the rest, will immediately surface in his memory. So when suddenly it was over and a thick silence, as if congealed with the morning chill, filled the camp, his first thought was that he had to immediately find some poison in Eloar's medkit and always have it on him. Who knows what might happen—he now knows so much that he must never be captured alive.

"Haladdin!" Sharya-Rana called; his voice was unusually quiet and halting, as if the nazgúl was catching his breath after a long climb. "Come here, please . . ."

He's in a really bad way, Haladdin recognized belatedly, how could I not have seen it myself, selfish bastard . . . what's wrong with him? Looks like heart trouble. Somehow, the idea of heart trouble in a ghost did not seem ridiculous to him either then or in the next moment, when he realized with terrible clarity: this is it! He has seen too many dying men during those last few years not to be sure. The head of the sitting nazgúl drooped listlessly, and he touched the shoulder of the man now kneeling in front of him.

"Did you understand everything I've told you?" Haladdin could only nod; something caught in his throat.

"I have nothing more to give you. Forgive me. Only the ring . . ."

"Is this because of me? Because you . . . for me . . ."

"Nothing is free, Haladdin. Wait; let me lean on you . . . like that . . . The time was almost up, but I made it. I did. The rest is not important. It's you who will walk this path now . . ."

Sharya-Rana was silent for a while, gathering strength. Then he spoke again, and his voice was almost as even as before:

"I will now remove the spell from my ring, and . . . I will be no more. You will take it; it will empower you to act in the name of the Order of the Nazgúl when necessary. Our rings are made of inoceramium, the most rare noble metal, a third again as heavy as gold, can't confuse it with anything else. People fear those rings, with good reason; yours will be clean, free of all magic, but you'll be the only one to know that. Will you be afraid?"

"No. I remember it well: *nothing can happen to a person who is not afraid.* Is this really ancient magic?"

"None more ancient."

Suddenly he understood that Sharya-Rana was trying to smile but could not: the darkness under his cowl, alive and flowing like a spring in the night not so long ago, now resembled a brick of coal dust.

“Farewell, Haladdin, and remember: you have everything you need to win. Repeat it as an incantation and don’t be afraid of anything. Now, take this . . . and turn away.”

“Farewell, Sharya-Rana. Don’t worry, everything will be as it should be.”

He carefully accepted a heavy dim ring from the nazgúl’s hand and stepped away obediently, so he did not see the wizard slowly push back his cowl. Only when he heard behind him a moan filled with such anguish that his heart nearly stopped (so that’s what “all the World’s pain, all the World’s fear, all the World’s despair” means!), did he turn around—but there was nothing except quickly melting shreds of the black cloak where Sharya-Rana just sat.

“Was that you screaming?”

Haladdin turned around. His comrades, up in flash (the baron was still whirling the wickedly glinting *Slumber-maker* over his head), were looking at him gloomily, awaiting explanations.

CHAPTER 19

Perhaps a clandestine operations professional would have done it differently, but he was not one, so he simply told them everything (save burdening Tzerlag with all the 'parallel worlds'stuff). He had a visit from a nazgúl (here's the ring) who told him that he, Haladdin, is the only human able to prevent the Elves from turning all of Middle Earth into their fiefdom and all Men into slaves. To do so, he must destroy Galadriel's Mirror within a hundred days.

He has decided to accept the mission, since there's no one else to do it. So far, he has no idea how or what to do, but hopefully he'll come up with something.

Tzerlag looked the ring over warily and of course refused to touch it (the One preserve us!); it was obvious that the doctor had ascended to stratospheric heights in his esteem—as opposed to the Nazgúl, who had descended a similar distance. It's one thing to send a man to certain death—war is war—but to give a subordinate an impossible task is quite another.

A real frontline officer would never do that. To sneak into Lórien, where no man had ever managed to enter, to locate, in a hostile town, what is undoubtedly a well-guarded object, which for good measure can't be destroyed on site, but has to be lugged a hell of a distance . . . In any event, he, Sergeant Tzerlag, scouting platoon leader of the Cirith Ungol Rangers, will not so much as lift a finger until he has a tangible job to do; all these 'go there—don't know where' games are not for him. What? Well, that's your problem, Field Medic, sir—you're the senior officer here.

Tangorn's statement was short: "I'm twice in your debt, Haladdin. Therefore, if the third sword of Gondor can help your mission in any way, it is at your service. However, the Sergeant is right—infiltrating Lórien directly is suicide, we'll have no chance. We need some sort of a ruse; as I understand it, that's your business."

That's how it came to pass that he went to sleep that night a leader

of a company of three, with the other two (accomplished military professionals, unlike him) looking to him for a tangible task—something, alas, which he did not have for them.

Haladdin spent the next day sitting by the stream; he noticed that his comrades were gently relieving him of all housekeeping duties ("Your job now is to think"), and realized to his acute displeasure that he was incapable of thinking to order. The sergeant had told him a few things about Lórien (the Orocuen had once been in a raid near the edge of the Enchanted Forest): about the paths neatly lined with stakes bearing the skulls of would-be unwanted visitors; about the deadly traps and the roving bands of archers that shower you with poisoned arrows and immediately melt into impassable thicket without a trace; about brooks whose water puts a human to sleep and golden-green birds that gather around any creature that enters the forest and give away its location with their lovely songs. After correlating this information with what Sharya-Rana had told him about the mores and customs of the Forest Elves he saw clearly that the Elvish society was totally closed to foreigners and any attempt to get into the Enchanted Forest without a local guide would end within the first mile.

He spent some time considering using the glider that Sharya-Rana had left at Dol Guldur, the launch pad for Mordor's infrequent flyovers of Lórien. Suppose he flies to the Elvish capital (or, rather, is flown there by someone who knows piloting) and manages to land in some inconspicuous clearing; suppose further that he actually steals or captures the Mirror; then what? How would he get it out? There is no glider catapult there, nor anyone to operate it, nor can any glider lift a thousand pounds. Another dead end. How about capturing an Elvish officer and having him guide their company through the Enchanted Forest traps? No doubt he'd guide them straight into a trap; if what he's learned about the inhabitants of Lórien is true, an Elf would choose death over treason.

The notes found among Eloar's belongings haven't escaped his attention, either. Those were mostly travel notes; the only item with useful content was an unsent letter, beginning with 'Dearest Mother!' and addressed to 'Milady Eornis, *clofoel* of the Lady.' About half of it was a description, remarkable in its artistic expressiveness, of the valley of river Nimrodel—it seemed that both the Elf and his mother had special memories associated with that location. In general it looked like the memory of those glades with their *mallorns* reaching to

the very sky, where bursts of golden *elanors* hide in the emerald-green grass, was what had sustained the Elf's spirit among the hated sands of Mordor. Eloar expressed concerns over the rumored break-up between his cousin Linóel and her fiancé, criticized his older brother Elandar for 'encouraging futile hopes in the hearts of his protégés in Gondor and Umbar,' congratulated his mother on the high honor of having been chosen to organize this year's Festival of the Dancing Fireflies . . . plus much more of the same. They had already guessed that Eloar's family was part of the highest elite of Lórien (Sharya-Rana explained that it was difficult to exactly translate the Elvish title *clofoel*—something between a lady-in-waiting and a royal adviser). That the Elves were secretly infiltrating all parts of Middle Earth and that one of those tasked with this covert activity was one Elandar undoubtedly would be of much interest to the local authorities and counter-intelligence services, but had no bearing on their mission. To sum it up: one more dead end.

Haladdin suffered thusly through the day, spent half a night nursing a cup of hideously strong tea, and finally woke up Tzerlag and went to sleep without a single idea. It should be mentioned that the day before, having observed his comrades preparing for the march, calmly and substantially, he resolved firmly to break his head if it was necessary to come up with at least an intermediate solution. Even he knew that an army without a mission quickly goes to pot.

He slept badly that night, waking intermittently and only truly sleeping close to sunrise. He dreamed of a wonderful circus and himself—a large-eared second-grader skipping school, fingers sticky with cotton candy. Heart almost still, he is watching an unimaginably beautiful girl in a golden cape, slowly walking across the dark abyss on a thinnest of golden rays; he had never seen a tightrope walker to also juggle three large balls as she walks—how is this possible? Wait—this is Sonya! NO! Stop her—this is not her job, she doesn't know how!.. Yes, I understand—she can't turn back, going back is even scarier . . . Yes, if she doesn't become afraid, nothing will happen to her, it's ancient magic. Of course it's magic: those balls she's juggling are *palantíri*! All the three Seeing Stones that are in reach in this part of Middle Earth; we've collected them ourselves and turned them over to her . . . I wonder: if I and Sonya each had a *palantír*, would we be able to transmit a touch?

He woke up with that thought; it turned out to be late morning. The pot was bubbling soothingly over a fire (Tzerlag had trapped a few

partridges), while Tangorn was busy polishing his beloved *Slumber-maker*. It was sunlight reflecting off the sword that woke up Haladdin: his comrades obviously did not intend to wake up the doctor, but to let him get enough sleep. He followed the reflection arcing swiftly over the boulders on the shadowed side of the dale with his gaze and thought sadly: that's what would have no problems reaching the palace of Lady Galadriel—a light ray!..

. . . A brilliant flash lit up all the nooks of his tired brain when by a wonderful coincidence the last dream thought and the first waking thought brushed wingtips before flying apart forever.

There's your solution—send a light ray through a *palantír* . . . He had such flashes of insight before (for example, when he guessed and later proved that the signals traveling over nerve fibers were electrical, rather than chemical, in nature), and yet each and every time there was some magic novelty in the experience, like in a lovers' meeting. All creative work has two components: the first insight and then painstaking work, sometimes for years, whose goal is to make your insight available to other people. The nature of insight is always the same, whether in poetry or criminal detection, nobody knows where it comes from (one thing is certain, though—it is not from logic); and the moment of insight, when for however brief an instant you're equal to the One Himself, is the only thing truly worth living for.

"Gentlemen!" he announced, coming up to the fire. "It looks like I've managed to put together this puzzle after all, or at least a substantial part of it. The idea is simple: rather than taking the Mirror to Orodruin, we will take Orodruin to the Mirror."

Tzerlag froze with a full spoon halfway to his mouth and shot a wary look to the baron: has our commander gone nuts from all that thinking? Tangorn politely raised a brow and suggested that the doctor have some partridges first, while they're hot, and only then broach his extravagant hypothesis.

"To hell with the partridges! Just listen! There are other magical crystals beside the Mirror—the *palantíri*. We have one of them, or at least we can get it whenever we want . . ."

He related everything he knew about the Seeing Stones, marveling at his comrades' ability, given their lack of any education in magic or science, to precisely pluck the bits they considered important from that torrent of information. Everyone was absolutely serious now—the real work had begun.

". . . So, suppose we have two *palantíri*—one set to receive, the other set to send. If we drop the 'sender' into Orodruin, it will be destroyed, but not before managing to transmit a bit of the Eternal Fire to the immediate environs of the 'receiver.' Therefore, our task is to place one such receiver next to the Mirror."

"Well, fair sir," the baron said thoughtfully, "your idea certainly doesn't lack what they call 'noble madness' . . ."

Tzerlag scratched his neck. "Better tell me how we're gonna get a *palantír* into Lórien and find the Mirror there?"

"I don't know yet. All I can say is what I said yesterday: I hope to come up with something."

"You're right, Haladdin," Tangorn agreed. "At least we have a concrete task for now: to find another *palantír*. I think that we should start in Ithilien, since Faramir is bound to know what happened to the crystal that used to belong to his father. Besides, I'm certain that you will quite incomparably enjoy conversing with the prince . . ."

PART II

The King and the Steward

“And besides, when folk talk of a country covered with troops,
it’s but a kind of a byword at the best.
A soldier covers nae mair of it than his bootsoles.”[37]
Robert L. Stevenson

CHAPTER 20

Ithilien, Emyn Arnen

May 3, 3019

“What time is it?” Éowyn asked sleepily.

“Sleep on, sweetheart.” Faramir rose on his elbow a little and gently kissed the top of her head. Apparently it was a sharp movement in his sleep that woke up the girl; his wounded arm kept going numb, but he never let on, knowing that she preferred to sleep stretched along his body, her head pillowed on his shoulder. As usual, they have only fallen asleep close to sunrise, so by now the sun’s rays were already bathing the wooden buildings of Fort Emyn Arnen, getting in the narrow window of their ‘princely bedchamber.’ In the olden times the prince was always up with the dawn; being a morning person, his best working hours were before noon. Now, however, he slept late with a clear conscience: first, a honeymoon is a honeymoon; second, a prisoner has nowhere to hurry.

However, she had slipped out from under his arm already, and her laughing eyes looked at the prince with fake severity: “Listen, we’ll totally undermine the public morals of the Ithilien colony.”

“Like there’s something there to undermine,” he grumbled. Éowyn flitted to the foot of the bed, sat down there, naked and cross-legged, and began putting her ripe-wheat hairdo in order, glancing at him from time to time from under lowered eyelashes. He told her on one of their first nights, only half-joking, that looking at his beloved brushing her hair in the morning[38] is one of the most intense and exquisite pleasures available to man, so now she kept polishing and perfecting this little ritual of theirs, jealously observing his reaction: do you still like it, darling? He smiled to himself, remembering how

Prince Imrahil used to insist that northern women, for all their beauty, are a cross between a dead fish and a birch log in bed. I wonder if it's my good luck or his bad one for all those years?

"I'll make coffee for you."

"Now that is certainly a blow to public morals!" Faramir laughed. "The Princess of Ithilien in the kitchen—an aristocrat's nightmare!"

"I'm afraid they'll have to put up with my lack of refinement and manners. For example, I intend to go hunting today and prepare some real baked venison for supper, and let them all blow their gaskets! I can't abide our cook's fare anymore; the guy apparently knows no spices other than arsenic and strychnine!"

She should go, he thought, and perhaps we'll start the Game tonight? Lately he and Éowyn were allowed to leave the fort one at a time—enough to be grateful for; the hostage system has its advantages.

"Will you read to me tonight?"

"Certainly. About Princess Allandale again?"

"Well . . . yes!"

Those evening readings were another of their rituals; Éowyn had a few favorite stories which she was ready to hear again and again, like a child. Like most of Rohan's elite, the girl was illiterate, so the magical world that Faramir laid open before her astonished her imagination. That was the beginning of their relationship . . . or perhaps it started earlier?

. . . On the day of the battle for Pelennor fortifications the prince was commanding the right defensive flank; he fought in the front line, so it was bewildering that a heavy armor-piercing arrow struck him from behind—in the trapezius muscle, to the left of the base of his neck. Its three-sided tip had channels for poison, so by the time the good knight Mithrandir got him to Minas Tirith the prince was in a bad way. For some reason he was carried to a far room in the hospital, and, most astonishingly, forgotten there. Completely helpless, he lay right on the stone floor—the poison had caused blindness and paralysis, so that he could not even cry for help—feeling the cold of the grave spreading through his body from the already numb left arm and neck. His brain still functioned normally, and he understood clearly that he was believed to be dead.

An eternity passed, full of loneliness and despair, and then he felt the sharp taste of some oily liquid on his lips; the sensation seemed familiar, dredging up a half-forgotten name: *athelas*. The cold

retreated a little, as if unwillingly, and a commanding voice floated out of the darkness: “Prince, if you’re conscious, move the fingers of your right hand.”

How was he supposed to move fingers he couldn’t feel? Perhaps he should remember a movement in all its details . . . here, he’s taking his sword out of the scabbard, feeling the supple leather of its grip . . .

“Very well!”

Did it work? Apparently, yes.

“Now, a bigger challenge. One movement will mean ‘yes’, two mean ‘no’. Try saying ‘no’.”

He tried to imagine making a fist twice . . . whatever for? Oh yes: here, he’s taking a pen from the table, writes down a word, puts it down; now he has to pick it up again to make a correction . . .

“Wonderful. Allow me to introduce myself: Aragorn, son of Arathorn. As the direct descendant of Isildur, I wish to express my royal gratitude to you: the dynasty of Stewards of Gondor, of which you are the last heir, had maintained my throne well. Now this arduous task is over: I have come to relieve your dynasty of this burden. From now on your name will be the first of the glorious families of the Reunited Kingdom. Do you understand what I’m saying, Faramir?”

He understood it all perfectly, but moved his fingers twice—‘no’—otherwise it would mean that he implicitly agreed with this nonsense. A descendant of Isildur, right—why not Ilúvatar himself?

“You have always been an alien to them, Prince.” Aragorn’s voice was quiet and compassionate, as if he was a bosom friend. “It’s quite understandable that they greatly resented your studies, that’s not a royal pursuit. However, they even blamed you for creating the Ithilien regiment and setting up an intelligence network beyond Anduin, didn’t they?”

Pride would not let him answer ‘yes,’ honesty precluded answering ‘no:’ all this was true, this Aragorn really did know his Gondorian politics. When the war broke out, Faramir, himself an excellent hunter, formed a special unit for forest combat out of free shafts (and not a few outlaws)—the Ithilien regiment; the famous Cirith Ungol Rangers soon discovered that their monopoly on lightning raids through enemy’s rear was over. The prince personally commanded the Ithilienians in a number of skirmishes (for example, the one that trapped and destroyed a whole caravan of *mûmakil*) and even had time to write something like a manual for what would much later be

called ‘commando warfare.’ As a result, the aristocrats in the capital joked that he was about to add a flail and a black mask to his familial coat of arms. And long before the war Faramir, who had an honest and profound love of the East and its culture, had set up a regular collection of military and political information in its countries through volunteer efforts of like-minded people—the first real intelligence agency in Western lands. Making his case on its reports, the prince argued in the Royal Council for cooperation with states beyond the Anduin, earning himself the ‘defeatist’ label and almost getting branded as an enemy collaborationist.

“Your father had always thought you a softie, so much so as to openly start looking for ways to disinherit you when Boromir died . . . But this didn’t bother you in the least; you even joked back then that since the pen had callused your finger, the scepter would wear your palms to the bone—very well said, Prince, short and to the point! So —” suddenly Aragorn’s voice became dry and hard, “let’s say that we’re simply back to the starting point: you still have no claim to the throne of Gondor, but the new king will be me rather than your wayward brother, the Valar rest his soul. Are you listening?”

‘Yes’

“The situation, then, is like this: Denethor is dead; this is a hard blow, but I think you’ll survive it. There’s a war on, the country is leaderless, and therefore I, Aragorn, the heir of Isildur, having today defeated the hordes of the East on the Field of Pelennor, accept the crown of the Reunited Kingdom at the army’s request. This is set; alternatives exist only as far as your own fate, Prince. Option number one: you abdicate the throne (remember that yours is a dynasty of Stewards, rather than Kings!) and leave Minas Tirith to become a prince of one of the lands of Gondor; I think that Ithilien will suit you just fine. Option number two: you refuse, but then I will not treat you —whatever for?—and will assume the crown after your imminent demise. By the way, nobody but me knows that you’re still alive; the funeral is set for today, and I will simply let it proceed. After a few hours you’ll hear the tombstone seal your family crypt . . . I’m sure your imagination can fill in the rest.

Do you understand, Faramir?”

The prince’s fingers were silent. He had always had the cool courage of a philosopher, but the idea of being buried alive can instill crushing dread into any soul.

“Oh no, this won’t do at all. If you don’t give me a clear answer in

half a minute, I'll leave, and in a couple of hours, when the *athelas* wears off, the undertakers will come. Believe me that I much prefer option one, but if you would rather have the crypt . . ."

'No'

"No—meaning yes? You agree to become Prince of Ithilien?"

'Yes'

"We have a mutual understanding, then; your word is quite sufficient—so far. Some time from now you'll regain your ability to speak, and I will visit you with Prince Imrahil, who is the temporary regent of the town and country after the passing of Denethor. By then Imrahil will have examined my royal credentials and will confirm them to you; you, in turn, will confirm your decision to resign as Steward of Gondor and move to Ithilien. The entire Gondor knows of the Prince's nobility and his friendship with you, so I expect that the people will duly accept his announcement. Do you agree? Answer: yes or no?!"

'Yes'

"By the way, I'll answer your unspoken question: why don't I do away with you, option two being both simple and reliable? I'm being quite pragmatic here: an alive, abdicated Faramir in Ithilien is harmless, whereas his dead body in a crypt of the Stewards of Gondor would no doubt spawn a legion of pretenders—false Faramirs. Oh, and another thing: I'm certain that you would not go against your given word, but just in case, bear this in mind: no one but me in the entire Middle Earth can heal you, and this healing will take a long time yet and can take unexpected turns . . . do you understand me?"

'Yes' (What's not to understand? A simple poisoning would be the least of his worries; what if he were turned into a vegetable, to drool and soil himself for the rest of his life?)

"Excellent! I'll say just one more thing in conclusion, because I believe that it's important to you . . ." To the prince's considerable amazement, there was genuine emotion in Aragorn's voice now. "I promise to rule Gondor in such a way that you, Faramir, will never have a single occasion to think that you would have done it better. I promise that the Reunited Kingdom will prosper and flourish like never before. And I also promise that the story of the King and the Steward will be so treated in all the chronicles as to glorify you forever.

Now drink this and sleep."

He came back to conscience still in the thrall of darkness and

speechlessness, but the terrible cold had retreated to the location of the wound, and—happiness!—he could feel pain and could even move a little. There were voices nearby, but they fell silent . . . And then She appeared.

CHAPTER 21

First there was only her hand—small but unwomanly strong; the hand of a rider and a swordswoman, as he immediately determined. The girl did not possess the habits of a real nurse, but it was obvious that treating the wounded was nothing new to her. Why is she doing everything one-handed, though—an injury of her own, perhaps? He tried estimating her height from how far she could reach sitting on the edge of his bed—it worked out to about five and a half feet. Once he was incredibly lucky: she leaned over him, and her silky hair brushed the prince's face. Thus he learned that she was not wearing her hair up (that meant a woman of the North, from Rohan); but most important was that now he would never confuse this smell with any other, an aroma like that of a steppe breeze, mixing the dry heat of the sun-kissed earth with the pungent refreshing smell of sagebrush.

In the meantime Aragorn's medicine was working; the very next day he could speak his first words, which were, unsurprisingly: "What's your name?"

"Éowyn."

Éowyn. Like the sound of a bell—not a regular brass bell, but one of those porcelain bells that are sometimes brought from the Far East. Yes, the voice fit her owner quite well—at least it fit the image he had put together in his mind.

"So what's the matter with your left arm, Éowyn?"

"Oh, you can see already?!"

"Alas, no; this is just a conclusion I've reached in my musings."

"Really? Explain!"

He described her appearance as he had put it together from the scraps of information he had.

"That's amazing!" she exclaimed. "All right, tell me—what kind of eyes do I have?"

"Most certainly large and wide-set."

"No, I mean the color?"

“The color, hmm . . . Green!”

“I’ve believed you!” there was genuine disappointment in the girl’s voice, “but you must’ve simply seen me somewhere before.”

“I swear by anything, Éowyn, I’ve simply named my favorite color. So I guessed right?

But you still haven’t told me about your arm. Have you been wounded?”

“That’s only a scratch, believe me, especially compared to yours. It’s just that men have a habit of brushing us aside when dividing the spoils.”

Éowyn described the Battle of Pelennor Field clearly and crisply, like a professional warrior, all the while taking care of him, now giving him medicine, then changing the dressing on the wound. It seemed to Faramir that she radiated some kind of special warmth; it was this warmth, rather than medicines, that chased away the deathly chill tormenting his body. But when, moved by gratitude, he covered Éowyn’s hand with his, she took it away politely but firmly and left her charge, saying: “This is quite unnecessary, Prince,” and instructing him to ask for her should a real need arise. Saddened by this strange rebuff, he dozed (this was real sleep now, healing and refreshing), and upon awakening heard the tail end of a conversation, recognizing Éowyn as one of the participants and Aragorn—much to his surprise—as the other.

“. . . so you’ll have to go to Ithilien with him.”

“But why, Ari? You know that I can’t be without you now.”

“It’s necessary, dear. It won’t be for very long—three weeks, perhaps a month.”

“That is very long, but I will do what you need, don’t worry. You want me to be by his side?”

“Yes, you will complete his treatment, you’re good at it. Plus you will check out how he does in the new place.”

“You know, he’s very nice.”

“Of course! You will have excellent conversation, I think you won’t be bored with him.”

“Bored? Oh, you’re too kind!..”

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean it to sound like that . . .” The voices went away, a door banged, and Faramir thought that although this was none of his business, nevertheless . . . Suddenly he cried out from an abrupt pain: previously unseen light flooded his eyes and seemed to burn the retina that had grown unaccustomed to seeing. She was

already by his side, holding his hand in alarm: “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Éowyn—I think I’m getting my sight back.”

“Really?!”

Everything around him swam in rainbow areolas, but the pain subsided quickly. When the prince finally managed to wipe away tears and take his first look at Éowyn, his heart stopped for a moment and then poured a heat wave through his body: he was looking at the girl he had pictured in his imagination. Not a similar girl, but that exact one, from the color of her eyes to the way she brushed her hair aside. I’ve created her myself, he thought in resignation, and now I will never get away.

. . . The fort of Emyn Arnen, now the official residence of His Highness the Prince of Ithilien, was not, strictly speaking, a fort. It was a log house of monumental proportions, with three floors, an unbelievably labyrinthine plan, and a cornucopia of architectural excesses: all sorts of turrets, dormers, and outside galleries. Nevertheless, the whole thing looked surprisingly harmonious. One could see the hand of the master craftsmen of Angmar in the construction—it is there, in the forests of the far North, that this wood-building technique flourishes. The house was impeccably positioned from the landscaping standpoint, but horribly from a military one, not protecting anything. Besides, the unknown fortification ‘experts’ that had built the stockade around it had done it in such an obvious revulsion for their craft that it could only serve as an exhibit for the relevant course at the Academy of Military Engineering: “How not to build external fortifications: find eight mistakes.” This must have been why Emyn Arnen had been abandoned by the Mordorians without a fight as indefensible, and passed to its current owners intact.

It was not quite clear, actually, who these new owners were. The Prince of Ithilien could only be called such in jest, as he was not permitted to even leave the fort alone. Much to her surprise, his guest Éowyn, the sister of the King of the Mark of Rohan, had discovered that she shared the prince’s weird status. She had asked for her sword back without a second thought, adding jokingly that she didn’t feel quite dressed without it, and got a joke in response: “A pretty girl looks even prettier underdressed.” Éowyn frowned in irritation: even by her uninhibited taste this compliment by a lieutenant of the White Company (forty men tasked by Aragorn to their protection) bordered on a *faux pas*. She made a note for herself to be on more official terms

with this bunch from now on, and requested a meeting with the company's commander, Captain Beregond.

After all, every joke has its limits: they are not in Minas Tirith any more, walking these woods unarmed, while there may still be goblins about, is simply unsafe.—Oh, Her Highness has nothing to fear in this respect; the goblins are her bodyguards' problem.—Does the Captain mean to say that those four thugs are going to accompany her everywhere?—Yes, certainly, and this is by direct order of His Majesty; although they can be replaced, if Her Highness dislikes these four.—By the way, Aragorn is neither her sovereign nor guardian, and if this is how it's going to be, she's coming back to Minas Tirith right away . . . actually, to Edoras, not Minas Tirith!—Unfortunately, this would be impossible without a written order from His Majesty.—So . . . not to put too fine a face on it, is she a prisoner?—Why, Your Highness! Prisoners stay under lock and key, whereas you can ride anywhere you want. Even to Minas Morgul, if you wish, but only with bodyguards and unarmed.

Strangely, only now did Éowyn realize that Faramir's lack of a sword could be due to earthly reasons rather than the prince's poetic disposition.

By process of elimination it would seem that Beregond was the real master of Ithilien, but one only had to see him move charily through the corridors of the fort, avoiding eye contact with his prisoner, to understand that this was rank nonsense. The captain was a ruined man, because he knew that he had guarded Denethor's chambers on that tragic day and that he was the one who announced the King's suicide to the public—that is, he knew, but he could not remember a thing. His memory of that nightmarish day sported a large charred hole, in which Mithrandir's whitish shadow flitted sometimes; the knight seemed to have had a hand in those events, but Beregond could not figure it out. It is hard to say what prevented the captain from taking his own life; perhaps he realized that by doing so he would have accepted the guilt for the crime, to the delight of the real murderers. In Minas Tirith a wall of scorn had surrounded him since that day—few believed the self-immolation story—so Aragorn could find no better man to lead the White Company. The job required a man who could not possibly conspire with Faramir—and here Aragorn had made a mistake: for all his knowledge of people, he had not foreseen that the prince, whom Beregond had often dandled on his knee, would be perhaps the only person in all of Gondor to believe in

the captain's innocence.

As for the men of the White Company, who not only guarded the fort but also filled all the housekeeping jobs (from majordomo to cook), they did not talk to the prince much at all.

'Yes, Your Highness; no, Your Highness; I don't know, Your Highness'—that was the extent of the conversation, with 'don't know' a clear favorite. They were ordered to guard, so they guarded; were they ordered to kill him, they would undoubtedly do that, too.

Faramir could not figure out whose orders those cutthroats obeyed, but he did not believe even for a moment that it was Beregond. At the same time, there seemed to be no messages from Aragorn, either, unless they had clandestine communications with Minas Tirith without the captain's knowledge—but then why make it so complex?

Indeed it was a strange crowd that made its home in Emyn Arnen that spring, and the funniest thing was that all the participants of *The Prince of Ithilien and His Court* show made a touchingly united effort to keep that strangeness from becoming the subject of discussion outside its walls, where real life went on.

In real life it was a rare day that Faramir did not bless a new group of subjects—yet another group of settlers from Gondor. Many of those were not at all eager to show themselves to the court, preferring instead to huddle in the farthest reaches of the forest; it was clear that they regarded tax collectors as a much more harmful and dangerous threat than the 'goblins' that supposedly infested those thickets. During the war those people have learned to wield weapons expertly and got out of the habit of bowing to landlords, so the Prince of Ithilien would not have been able to control the fortified forest hamlets these people were building even if he wanted to, which he did not. All he did was try to convey to the newcomers that they would not be fleeced in his demesne, and the message seemed to be getting through: lately grim armed men from the far hamlets have been showing up at the main Settlement, with pointed inquiries about prices for honey and smoked venison. That year axes and hammers sounded throughout Ithilien: the settlers built houses, cleared forests for fields, put up mills and dry distilleries. They were settling the forests beyond Anduin for good.

CHAPTER 22

More than a month has gone by since the end of the Mordorian campaign, and still Éowyn had no message from Aragorn. Well, who knows what the circumstances are . . . If she had reached any conclusions already, she kept them to herself and her behavior had not changed a bit. The only difference was that she no longer asked Beregond daily for news from Minas Tirith. It also seemed to Faramir that her remarkable gray-green eyes have acquired a new, colder, bluish tint, but that would have been really supernatural. The girl treated the prince with genuine warmth and sympathy, but she had channeled their closeness into nothing but friendship from the very beginning, and he had to accept that.

They were sitting at the dinner table in the Knights Hall of the fort, unwelcoming because of its large size, when a Gondorian lieutenant in a dusty cloak showed up, accompanied by several soldiers. Faramir immediately offered the messenger wine and venison, but the man shook his head. His business is so urgent that he will only change horses and ride back. He has the King's orders to pick up Éowyn from Emyn Arnen (the girl leaned forward and her shining face seemed to dispel the gloom of the hall) and escort her to Edoras, to the court of King Éomer.

He followed up with some Minas Tirith news of which Faramir had only consciously registered an unfamiliar name: Arwen. Arwen—sounds like the tolling of a gong, he thought fleetingly; I wonder what fight this gong announces . . . The prince looked up at Éowyn and his heart fell: her face was a bloodless mask of pain, her eyes seeming to take up half of it—a child who had just been cruelly and mercilessly tricked and is now about to be publicly mocked to boot.

But this show of weakness lasted for only a moment. Then the blood of six generations of steppe knights asserted itself: the sister of the King of the Mark of Rohan may not behave like a miller's daughter seduced by the landlord. Smiling charmingly (although the smile held

about as much warmth as moonlight upon a snowy White Mountains pass), Éowyn told the lieutenant that his orders were very strange, as she was not the subject of the man who called himself the King of Gondor and Arnor. In any event, they are presently outside the Reunited Kingdom, so if the Prince of Ithilien (a nod towards Faramir) does not object, she would like to avail herself of his hospitality for some more time.

The Prince of Ithilien had no objections, of course, and the only thing that really upset him about the situation was this: he was unarmed, so if Aragorn's men were under orders to remove the girl forcibly if necessary, he would have to fight with only the dagger he has just used to cut venison. A truly fitting end for the last heir of the ill-fated Anarion dynasty! At least this tragic farce will be concluded in its prevalent style . . . The prince glanced at Beregond, who stood on the right side of the table, and was startled by an astonishing change that had come over the captain: his gaze was firm as in the old days, and his hand rested familiarly on the hilt of his sword. Neither of them needed any words to understand that the old warrior had made his choice and was ready to die by Faramir's side.

Whereas the Gondorian officer was obviously perplexed: apparently his orders did not include any violence against royal persons. Éowyn smiled again—with real charm this time—and firmly took the upper hand:

"I'm afraid that you'll have to stay after all, Lieutenant. Do try the venison, it's especially good today. Your soldiers must need rest, too." She addressed the butler: "Gunt! See the King's men to the kitchen and make sure they're well fed after their journey. Oh, and arrange for their baths!"

Éowyn had the fortitude to stay until the end of the meal and even keep up the conversation:

"Please pass the salt . . . Thank you . . . So what's the news from Mordor, Lieutenant? We're quite cut off, here in the boonies . . ." It was clear, though, that she was holding on with the last of her strength. Looking at her, Faramir remembered some over-tempered glass he once saw: it looked just like a regular piece of glass, but shattered into tiny pieces with a tiny flick.

Of course he did not sleep that night; sitting by the lamp, he kept futilely wracking his brains, trying to think of ways to help. The prince was an expert in philosophy and pretty well versed in military and intelligence crafts, but to be honest, he knew little about the

intricacies of the female soul. So when his door opened without a knock and there was transparently pale Éowyn, in a nightshirt and barefoot, he was completely bewildered. She was already inside, though, stepping like a somnambulant; then the nightshirt fell down at her feet, and she ordered, head held high but eyelashes down: “Take me, Prince! Now!”

He picked up her light body—goodness, she’s shivering like crazy, must be nervous shakes!

—carried her to his bed and covered her with two warm cloaks. What else do I have here?

He looked around—aha, Elvish wine, just what she needs.

“Here, drink this, it’ll warm you up.”

“Wouldn’t you rather warm me up in another fashion?” She spoke with her eyes closed; her body, taut as a bowstring, was still shivering.

“Certainly not now. You’d hate me for the rest of your life, and with good reason.”

Then she knew for sure that, finally, it was all right to cry . . . So she cried, with abandon, like a child, while he was hugging that shivering, sobbing, infinitely dear girl to his chest and whispering something into her ear—he never could remember what he said, nor did it matter; his lips were salty with her tears. And when she was done pouring out her pain and disgust, she crawled back under the cloaks, took his hand and asked quietly: “Please tell me something . . . nice.” So he recited the best poems he knew, and every time he stopped she would squeeze his hand, as if afraid of being lost in the night, and ask with an inimitable child’s intonation: “More! Please, a little more!..”

She fell asleep in the early morning, still holding his hand, so he waited by the side of the bed until her sleep grew deeper; only then did he kiss her temple gently and removed himself to the armchair. He woke up a couple of hours later from some small noise and immediately heard an angry “Please turn away!” and then a plaintive “Listen, give me something to put on—I can’t walk around like this!” a few seconds later. Then, standing in the door (with his hunting jacket on), she suddenly spoke quietly and very earnestly: “You know, those poems . . . It’s something amazing, I’ve never experienced anything like it. I’ll come this evening, and you’ll read me some more of that, all right?” To make a long story short, by the time Faramir sent a message to Edoras inquiring whether Éomer had any objections to his sister’s decision to become Princess of Ithilien, evening readings were

an indispensable part of their family life.

". . . Are you listening?"

Éowyn had long since washed up and dressed, and was now gazing at the prince, upset.

"I'm sorry, baby; I've been thinking."

"About something sad?"

"More like something dangerous. What if His Majesty the King of Gondor and Arnor sends us a wedding gift? Your joke about arsenic and strychnine might just be prophetic."

By saying this he had broken an unspoken commandment never to mention Aragorn inside these walls. Only once, at the very beginning of their romance, did Éowyn say (abruptly and with no connection to the preceding conversation): "If you want to know what he's like as a lover," she was looking out the window and did not see his gesture of protest, "I can utterly honestly say: nothing much. You see, he's accustomed only to taking, all the time and in everything; a real macho, you know . . ." Her lips twisted in a bitter smile. "Of course, most women want nothing else, but I'm not one of them . . ."

She looked at Faramir questioningly for a while, then nodded and said thoughtfully, as if making some final conclusion: "Yes, he totally could . . . Do you have a plan for how to avoid such a gift?"

"Yes, I do, but all depends on whether Beregond will be with us."

"Forgive me if this is not my business, but . . . this man killed your father. And a father is a father, no matter who he is."

"I think that Beregond is not at fault. What's more, I intend to prove it today, first and foremost to himself."

"Why today?"

"Because it was unwise to do it before. That day in the dining hall he behaved recklessly. I haven't spoken to him since then precisely to allay any suspicions the White Company guys might have, but now it looks like it's now or never. In other words, please ask him to come see me for some innocuous reason, and make sure to speak to him in public—we have no secrets! And when you go hunting, try to lose your bodyguard, casual-like, and ask the people about a certain forest hamlet . . ."

There was a faint glimmer of hope in Beregond's eyes when he entered—perhaps not all is lost?

"Hail, Your Highness!"

"Hello, Beregond; let's not be so official. I would like you to help me contact His Majesty."

The prince rummaged in a cargo box by the wall and carefully placed a large ball of smoky crystal on the table.

"A Seeing Stone!" The captain was amazed.

"Yes, this is a *palantír*. The other one is in Minas Tirith. For some reason Aragorn doesn't want me to use it myself and had a spell put on it. So please, look into it . . ."

"No!" Beregond shook his head in despair; terror was on his face. "Anything but that! I don't want to see Denethor's charred hands!"

"So you've seen them before?" The prince felt a sudden mortal weariness—did he, in fact, misjudge this man?

"No, but they told me . . . Anyone who looks into his *palantír* sees them!"

"Don't worry, Beregond." There was relief in Faramir's voice. "This is not Denethor's *palantír*; that one is at Minas Tirith, and no danger to you."

"Really?" With some trepidation the captain picked up the Seeing Stone and looked into it for some time, then put it down with a sigh. "Forgive me, Prince, but I can see nothing."

"You have already seen everything you need, Beregond. You are not guilty of Denethor's death; you can sleep calmly."

"What?! What did you say?"

"You are not guilty of Denethor's death," the prince repeated. "Forgive me, but I had to trick you: this is, indeed, his *palantír*. It is true that blackened fingers can be seen in it, but only those who were involved in the murder of the King of Gondor see them. You saw nothing, so you're innocent. On that day your will had been paralyzed by someone's powerful magic, most likely Elvish."

"Is this true?" Beregond whispered. "Perhaps you just want to console me, and this is some other *palantír* . . ." (Please tell me it's not so!)

"Think about it—who would give me another *palantír*? They only gave this one back to me because they believe it to be irretrievably damaged; they can see nothing in it past Denethor's hands, which block the entire field of vision. Luckily, they don't even suspect that people innocent of the crime can still use it."

"So why did you tell me that it was another one?"

"Well, you see . . . you're trusting and easily influenced, Beregond, and the Elves and Mithrandir have used that. I was afraid that you'd convince yourself that you could see that picture; self-hypnosis does weirder things sometimes . . . But now, praise Eru, it's over."

“It’s over,” Beregond repeated hoarsely. He kneeled and stared at the prince with such doglike devotion that the latter was embarrassed. “So you will let me serve you, just like before?”

“Yes, I will, but please rise immediately. Now, tell me: am I the sovereign of Ithilien to you?”

“How else, Your Highness?!”

“If so, do I have the right, while remaining a vassal of the Crown of Gondor, to replace the personal guard imposed on me by the King?”

“Certainly, but this is easier said than done. The White Company is only nominally under my command; I’m more of a quartermaster here.”

“Yes, I’ve figured that out. Who are they, by the way—Dúnedain?”

“The soldiers are, but as for officers and sergeants—those are all from the King’s Secret Guard. Nobody knows where they came from to Gondor; there’re rumors—” Beregond shot a glance at the door, “that they’re living dead. Nor can I figure out who their chief is.”

“Well, well . . . in any case we should get rid of these guys, the sooner the better. So, Captain—will you take the risk by my side?”

“You have saved my honor; therefore, my life is yours with no reservations. But three against forty . . .”

“I think that we’re way more than three.” Beregond stared at the prince in amazement.

“About a week ago the men from one of the forest hamlets brought a cart of smoked deer meat to the fort and got into an argument with the gate guards—those demanded that they leave their bows outside, as is their procedure. There was a black-haired guy there who made a big racket: how come noblemen can enter the Prince’s residence armed, but the merry men from the Blackbird Hamlet can’t? Do you remember?”

“Yes, I recall something like that; so?”

“So that guy was Baron Grager, lieutenant of the Ithilien regiment and my resident spy in Khand before the war. I’m inclined to think that he’s not alone in that Blackbird Hamlet.

Your task is to establish contact with Grager, then we’ll play it by ear. You and I will only contact each other via a dead drop from now on—if you stand on the sixteenth step of the spiral staircase in the northern wing, there is a small crack on the left wall at elbow height, just right for a note. One can’t be seen using the drop either from the top or the bottom of the stairs, I’ve checked. Now. Once you leave here, pretend to go on a drinking binge for a couple of days, since I’ve

asked you to try and contact Aragorn via the *palantír*, and you saw Denethor's hands in it. Don't overdo it, though: the White officers seem very perceptive."

That same evening the first crime occurred in the Settlement—arson. Some idiot fired—no, not the house of a successful romantic rival, nor the warehouse of an innkeeper who refused to pour him one on credit, nor the hayloft of a haughty neighbor. Rather, someone burned down the pigeon coop belonging to a grim single blacksmith who had moved here from Anfalas and apparently have kept some city habits. The blacksmith loved his pigeons beyond all else, and promised a silver mark to whoever would lead him to the arsonist. The local police, in the persons of two White Company sergeants, turned the neighborhood upside down: knowing the mores of the Anfalasians, it was a safe bet that if the guilty party were not jailed quickly, very soon they would have to investigate a premeditated murder.

Faramir listened to this crazy story with an eyebrow raised high—he was very surprised.

More precisely, he really was surprised. There were only two possibilities: either the foe had made his first major blunder, or, conversely, he has figured out the prince's entire plan.

Either way the Game has begun; it has begun earlier than he expected and not how he expected, but there was no turning back.

CHAPTER 23

Mountains of Shadow, Hotont pass

May 12, 3019

"There's your Ithilien." The mountain Troll put down the sack and pointed forward, where the thick chaparral of low scrub oak piled up in the gorge below like dense clouds of light-green smoke. "I can go no further, but you won't get lost, the path is well-trod. You'll hit a stream in about an hour; the ford is a bit downstream. Looks scary, but it's fine to cross.

The thing there is not to be scared and step right into the eddies, that's where the water is calmest. Just re-pack and go."

"Thank you, Matun[39]!" Haladdin firmly shook the guide's shovel-wide hand. The Troll resembled a bear in both looks and demeanor: a good-natured placid honey-eater capable of turning, in a blink of an eye, into a deadly fighting machine fearsome even more in its swiftness and cunning than in its monstrous strength. The bulbous nose, the unkempt red beard, the expression of a yokel who just saw a carnival magician pull a gold coin out of his ear—all these concealed an excellent warrior, both skilled and ruthless. Looking at him, Haladdin always recalled what he had heard once: peaceful family men make the best fighters—when a man like this one, coming home from work one day, finds nothing but charred bones in the ruins of his home.

He glanced once again at the snowy masses of the Mountains of Shadow looming over them—not even Tzerlag would have been able to get their company through all these ice pools, vertical moss-covered walls and vast rhododendron-covered slopes.

"When you get back to the base, please take care to remind Ivar to

meet us in this same place in July."

"No worries, buddy: the chief never forgets anything. We have an agreement, so we'll be here through last week of July come hell or high water."

"Right. And if we're not here by August first, drink one to the rest of our souls."

In parting, Matun slapped Tzerlag's shoulder so that he barely kept his feet: "Be well, scout!" He and the Orocuen had become fast friends during the last few days. Of course, he did not even nod at Tangorn; had he only leave to do what he wanted to this Gondorian dude . . . Whatever, the officers know better. He had fought in Ivar the Drummer's guerilla band since the beginning of the occupation and knew full well that one is supposed to wait for a scouting team's return at the rendezvous point for no more than three days, and here the orders were for a full week! A mission of special importance, see? So the Gondorian dude must not be here just for show, either.

Yes, Haladdin thought, looking at the rhythmically bobbing pack on the baron's back, it all depends on Tangorn now: whether he can protect us in Ithilien the way we protected him up to now. He's Prince Faramir's personal friend—that's great, but we have to get to this wonderful prince first. Plus it may very well turn out that this Faramir is nothing but Aragorn's puppet, while the baron has rather peculiar relations with Minas Tirith authorities—he may have already been declared an outlaw . . . In other words, we may easily hang together, either in the forest if we run into a Gondorian patrol, or on the wall of Emyn Arnen; the funniest thing is that in the forest the baron will hang with us, while in the fort we'll hang with him. Yeah, the right company is key . . .

Such gloomy thoughts must have bothered the baron about ten days ago, when they confirmed that the route to Ithilien through Morgul Vale and the Cirith Ungol pass had been sealed shut by Elvish outposts, which meant that they had to seek help from the guerillas in the Mountains of Shadow. The worst fate would have been to run into one of the smaller bands that acknowledged no authority and were seeking nothing but revenge; no talk about any mission would have helped, as the guerillas now killed their prisoners with no less cruelty than their enemies did. Fortunately, using Sharya-Rana's information, Tzerlag managed to locate in the Shara-Teg Gorge a well-regulated company reporting to the main command of the Resistance. It was led by a commissioned officer, one Lieutenant Ivar, a one-armed veteran

of the North Army. A native of this area, he had turned the gorge into an unassailable fastness; among other things, he instituted a remarkable audible warning system on all the observation posts, earning himself the nickname “the Drummer.”

The lieutenant had weighed Haladdin’s nazgúl ring fearlessly in his hand, nodded and asked only one question: what can he do to assist sir Field Medic in his mission? Escort their recon team to Ithilien? No problem. His opinion is that they should use the Hotont pass; since it’s considered to be impassable during this time of year, it’s most likely unguarded from the Ithilien side. Unfortunately, his best guide, one Matun, is away on a mission. Can you wait three or four days? No problem, then; this will let you rest and fatten up a little, too—it’ll be one arduous trek . . . Only when all three of them got back the weapons of which they had been relieved by the forward guard did Tangorn return the poison he had borrowed from the doctor.

Haladdin had never been to this part of the country before, so now he observed the daily life of the Shara-Teg Gorge with genuine interest. The mountain Trolls lived spartanly but conducted themselves with truly princely dignity; to an outsider, only their hospitality often went beyond any reasonable measure, acutely embarrassing Haladdin. At least now he understood where the amazing ambience of the Barad-Dur house of his classmate Kumai came from.

The Trolls have always lived together in large tight-knit families, and since the only way to put up a house big enough for thirty people on a steep slope is to build up, their abodes were thick-walled stone towers twenty to thirty feet high.[40] The stonemasonry experience accumulated in the building of these miniature fortresses later made Troll expatriates into the leading city builders of Mordor. Their other line was metallurgy. First they perfected blacksmithing, making weapons cheap and therefore widely available; then they mastered working with iron-nickel alloys (most of the ores in the region were self-legated), and since then the swords worn by every local male over the age of twelve were the best in Middle Earth. Not surprisingly, the Trolls never knew any authority other than their own elders: only a total idiot will attack a Trollish tower and sacrifice half of the attacking force only to gain a dozen scrawny sheep as booty (or church tithe).

The Mordorian powers understood this well and therefore did nothing but recruit warriors here, which much flattered the Trolls.

Later, though, when mining and metal refining became their main occupation, the sale of those commodities was hit with a stupendous tax, but the Trolls did not seem to care—their indifference to wealth and luxury was already legendary, along with their stubbornness. This also gave rise to a popular legend that the known Trolls were only a half of that people. The other half (mistakenly called 'gnomes' or 'dwarves' in the Western countries, in confusion with another mythical race—that of underground smiths) supposedly were wealth-crazy and spent all their lives in secret underground tunnels, searching for gold and gems; they were allegedly miserly, aggressive, treacherous—in other words, a mirror image of the real, above-ground Trolls. Be that as it may, the fact remains: the Trollish community gave Mordor many outstanding personalities, from generals and bladesmiths to scientists and preachers, but not a single merchant of note.

When the Western allies implementing 'the final solution of the Mordorian problem' have finished 'mopping up' the foothills and went to work on the Trolls in their Ash and Shadow Mountains gorges, they quickly discovered that fighting mountain men was rather different from collecting ears in Gorgoroth. The Trollish villages have been decimated or worse—thousands of men have perished in the march on Esgaroth and on the Field of Pelennor—but waging war in the confines of the mountains pretty much nullifies numerical advantages.

The mountain dwellers always had the option to give battle in the narrowest points, where ten good warriors can hold back an entire army for hours, while catapults on the slopes above methodically pound the paralyzed enemy column. Having thrice buried large companies of the enemy under man-made avalanches in the gorges, the Trolls then expanded their operations to the foothills, so that the Easterlings and the Elves alike did not dare stir out of a few well-fortified outposts at night. In the meantime, people from the plains kept arriving at the mountain villages which were now guerilla bases —if the end is near, better to meet it armed and not alone.

CHAPTER 24

There were many intriguing personalities among those arriving in the Shara-Teg Gorge in those days. The doctor met one of them, a certain maestro Haddami, at Ivar's headquarters, where the small parchment-faced Umbarian with inexpressibly sad eyes worked as a clerk, from time to time offering Ivar highly interesting ideas for reconnaissance operations. The maestro had been one of the country's leading crooks; during the fall of Barad-Dur he was serving a five-year sentence there for a grandiose scam involving countersigned bank drafts.

Being a financial ignoramus, Haladdin could not appreciate the technical details, but judging by the fact that the defrauded merchants (the heads of the three oldest trading firms of the capital) have expended a titanic effort to keep the prosecution out of court and thus out of the public eye, the scheme must have been very good indeed. With no opportunities to ply his trade in the ruined city, Haddami dug up his secreted gold and headed south towards his historical motherland, but the exigencies of war brought him to the guerillas instead of to Umbar.

The maestro was a fountainhead of assorted talents; having sorely missed learned conversation, he willingly demonstrated those to Haladdin. For example, he could perfectly imitate anyone's handwriting, which was certainly very useful in his craft. Nor was this simple forgery of signatures; far from it. After studying a few pages of the doctor's notes, Haddami wrote a meaningful text which Haladdin first thought to be his own—I must have written and forgotten it; now he had found it and is playing games with my mind . . .

It turned out to be simultaneously simpler and more complex. Haddami was a genius graphologist able to put together a complete psychological profile of an author and then morph into him, so that the texts he wrote in other people's names were authentic, in a way.

After the maestro told Haladdin everything he had learned about him from a few handwritten lines, the doctor experienced

bewilderment liberally spiced with fear—this was real magic, and not benign, either. For a moment Haladdin was even sorely tempted to show the maestro some notes of Tangorn's, although he clearly realized that this would have been even worse than simply snooping in someone's private diary. No one has the right to know more about a person than he is willing to tell, and both friendship and love die together with the person's right to privacy.

That was when he had a weird idea to submit Eloar's letter (from the dead Elf's possessions) to Haddami's analysis. He and the baron went through its contents with a fine-tooth comb during their sojourn at Morgai, looking for any clues for entry into Lórien, but have found nothing useful. Now Haladdin wanted, for reasons unclear to himself, to have the Elf's psychological portrait.

The results surprised him beyond belief. From the fine curlicues of runes, Haddami weaved a portrait of an exceptionally noble and likeable person, perhaps too dreamy, and open to the point of vulnerability. To Haladdin's objections the graphologist insisted that his analysis of Eloar's other notes on topography and logistics only confirmed his conclusions; there was no mistake.

Finally, Haladdin lost his patience. "If so, your entire method isn't worth a damn!" he stated, and then described to the startled expert what he had seen in Teshgol, sparing him no grisly detail.

"Listen, doctor," somewhat haggard Haddami said after a pause, "I still insist—it wasn't him there, in that Teshgol of yours . . ."

"What do you mean, it wasn't him?! Perhaps he personally hadn't raped an eight-year-old girl before slitting her throat, but he commanded the people who did!"

"No, no, Haladdin, that's not at all what I mean! See, this is a deep, unimaginably deep (for us humans) split of personality. Imagine for a moment that you had to participate in something like Teshgol—just had to. You have a mother whom you love dearly; with the Elves, it can't be otherwise, since children are very few and every member of society is truly invaluable. I suspect that you'd do everything possible to keep any knowledge of this nightmare from her, and knowing the Elves' perceptiveness, simple lying or even withholding information would not be enough. This would require you to really turn into another person. Two totally different personalities in one creature—for internal and external consumption, so to speak. Do you understand me?"

"To be honest, not really. Split personalities are not my field of

expertise."

Strangely, apparently it was this conversation that pointed Haladdin towards the solution to the main problem he has been working on, and this solution shocked him with its primitiveness. It had been lying right there, on the surface, and now it seemed to him that he had been deliberately looking away, pretending not to see it. That evening the doctor got back to the tower to which they have been assigned late at night; the hosts were already in bed, but the fire was still burning in the hearth, and he sat there motionless, staring fixedly at the orange embers. He did not even notice when the baron appeared by his side.

"Listen, Haladdin, you look upset. Want a drink?"

"Yes . . . I suppose I do."

The local vodka burned his mouth and rolled along his spine like a spasm; he wiped his eyes and looked for a place to spit. The drink did not make him feel better, but did add a measure of detachment. Tangorn disappeared into the dark and returned with another stool.

"More?"

"No, thank you."

"Did something happen?"

"Yes. I've figured out how to plant our little gift on the Elves."

"So?"

"So now I'm pondering the eternal question of whether the ends justify the means."

"Hmm . . . can be either way, depending on the circumstances."

"Precisely. A mathematician would say that stated generally, the problem lacks a solution.

Therefore, instead of a clear directive the One in His infinite wisdom had decided to supply us with conscience, which is a rather delicate and unreliable device."

"So what does your conscience say now, Doctor?" Tangorn looked at him with faintly mocking interest.

"Conscience says clearly: no. Duty says, equally clearly: you must. So it goes . . . It must be nice to live by the knightly ethic: do what you must and let the chips fall where they may, right, Baron? Especially when someone had already let you know what you must do . . ."

"I'm afraid that no one can help you make this choice."

"Nor do I need any help. What's more," he turned away and, shivering, stretched his hands towards the cooling embers, "I would like to free you from any obligation to participate in our mission.

Believe me, even if we win with my plan, it will not be a victory to be proud of."

"Really?" Tangorn's face went hard, and his gaze suddenly weighed like an avalanche. "So your plan is of such a quality that to take part in it is a greater dishonor than abandoning a friend in need—and so far I have considered you to be one? Doctor, I greatly appreciate your concern for my conscience, but perhaps you'll allow me to make this judgment myself?"

"As you wish," Haladdin shrugged indifferently. "You can listen first and decline later. It's a fairly complicated scheme and we'll have to start from afar . . . What do you think is Aragorn's relationship with the Elves?"

"Aragorn and the Elves? You mean now, after they've put him on the throne of Gondor?"

"Of course. I think you have mentioned knowing Eastern mythology pretty well; perhaps you remember the tale of the Dwarves' Chain?"

"I have to confess to forgetting it."

"Well, it's a very edifying story. A long, long time ago the gods were trying to subdue Hahti, the hungry demon of Hell, who could've consumed the whole world. Twice they restrained him with a chain forged by the divine Blacksmith—first of steel, then of *mithril*—and both times Hahti tore it like a thread. So when the gods were down to their third and final attempt, they had to abase themselves by turning to the Dwarves for help. Those came through with a chain made from fishes' voice and the sound of cat's footfalls . . ."[41]

"Fishes' voice and the sound of cat's footfalls?"

"Yes. That's why neither of those are found in the world—all used up in that chain.

Actually, it seems to me that some other things got used up as well, such as gratitude of kings. Speaking of which, how do you think the gods paid the Dwarves?"

"By liquidating them, I suppose; how else?"

"Exactly! Actually, they only intended to liquidate them, but the Dwarves were to be reckoned with, too . . . but that's a different story. Back to Aragorn and the Elves . . ."

His tale was long and detailed, as he was also testing his logic. Afterwards, a silence fell, disturbed only by the howling wind outside the tower.

"You're a scary man, Haladdin; who would've thought?.." Tangorn said thoughtfully, looking at the doctor with a new interest and—yes,

respect. “The job we have undertaken brooks no timidity, but if we are, indeed, to win in this manner . . . In other words, I doubt that I will ever want to reminisce about it with you over a cup of wine.”

“If we are to win in this manner,” Haladdin echoed, “I don’t think that I will ever want to look at myself in a mirror.” (In any event, he added to himself, I will never dare look Sonya in the eye.)

“Actually,” the baron smirked, “allow me to take you back to earth: this discussion rather resembles dividing spoils before the battle. First you win this fight, then do your soul-searching. So far we see a light at the end of the tunnel, nothing more. I don’t think that our chances of survival are any better than one in five, so it’s an honest game, in a way.”

“Our chances? So you’re staying?”

“What else can I do? Why, do you think that you can do this without me? For example, how did you plan to approach Faramir? Your whole scheme will end before it begins without his participation, albeit passive. All right . . . Here’s what I think: this lure of yours has to be dropped nowhere else but Umbar. I will undertake that part of the operation, you and Tzerlag will only burden me there. Let’s go to sleep now; I will consider the details tomorrow.”

However, the next day they had another task: the long-awaited guide finally turned up, and off they went to conquer Hotont. It was the second week of May, but the pass still hadn’t opened up. The company was thrice hit by blizzards, and only the sleeping bags made from thickhorn skins saved them; once, after spending a day and a half in an igloo that Matun fashioned from quickly cut bricks of thick firn[42], they barely managed to dig themselves out.

In Haladdin’s memory the whole trek was one thick, glutinous nightmare. Oxygen deprivation had weaved a curtain of tiny crystal bells all around him—after every move all he wanted to do was to sink down in the snow and listen blissfully to their hypnotic tinkling.

It is not said for naught that freezing to death is the best way to go. The only time he broke out of that half-dream was when a huge furry figure appeared from nowhere on another side of a gorge about half a mile from where they were—a cross between an ape and a rearing bear. The creature moved awkwardly but preternaturally fast, disappearing amidst the boulders at the bottom of the gorge without paying any attention to them. That was the only time he had ever seen a scared Troll, something he thought impossible. “Matun, what was that?” The guide only waved a hand, as if warding against the Enemy:

it's gone, and that's good enough . . . So now they are walking a nice path amongst the oaks of Ithilien, enjoying the birdsongs, while Matun is going back, alone, through all those screes and firn fields.

. . . That same evening they reached a clearing where a dozen men were putting up a stockade around a couple of unfinished houses. Seeing them, they all grabbed their bows and the leader told them in a serious voice to put down their arms and approach slowly with hands up. Tangorn approached and informed them that their company was heading to Prince Faramir himself. The men shared glances and inquired whether the newcomer was from the Moon or an insane asylum. The baron looked closer at one of the builders, who was sitting at the top of a house astride a roof beam, and laughed heartily:

"Well, well, Sergeant! Nice welcome you have for your commanding officer!"

"Guys!!" yelled the man, almost tumbling off his perch. "May my eyes never see if it ain't Lieutenant Tangorn! Sorry, sir, we didn't recognize you; you look, you know . . . Hey, now we're all back together, so we'll do that White Company like . . ." and, elated, he aimed an expressive obscene gesture towards Emyn Arnen.

CHAPTER 25

Ithilien, Blackbird Hamlet

May 14, 3019

"So you just announced it to the entire Emyn Arnen: 'merry men from the Blackbird Hamlet?'"

"What else could I do—wait for the Eternal Fire to freeze? Both the Prince and the girl can only leave the fort with a White Company bodyguard, can't exactly talk with those guys present . . ."

The wick of an oil lamp on the edge of a rough wooden table cast fitful light on the speaker's face. It was swarthy and predatory, like that of a *mashtang*[43] bandit from the caravan trails south of Anduin; no wonder that its owner used to be equally comfortable in Khand caravanserais among bactrian drivers, smugglers, and lice-infested loudmouth dervishes, and in Umbar port dives of rather ill repute. It was Baron Grager many years ago who taught the newbie Tangorn in his first foray beyond the Anduin both the basics of intelligence work and, perhaps more importantly, the many Southern peculiarities without knowing which one will always remain a *greengo*[44], a permanent target of digs large and small from every Southerner, from a street boy to a palace courtier.

The master of Blackbird Hamlet reached questioningly towards the jug of wine, caught Tangorn's barely discernible 'no' gesture and obligingly moved it aside. The emotional encounter of two old friends was over; they were at work now.

"How quickly did you get in touch?"

"Nine days. The Whites ought to have forgotten that stupid episode already. The girl went hunting once—it's routine now—saw a shepherd boy with his flock on a distant pasture and lost her escort,

very professionally, for not more than ten minutes."

"A shepherd boy, eh? Did she give him a gold coin wrapped in a note?"

"Nope—took a splinter out of his foot and told him a story of how she and her brother, when they were kids, had to defend a herd against steppe wolves . . . Listen, is it true that they do everything themselves in the North?"

"Yes. Over there even crown princes tend horses in childhood, and princesses work in the kitchens. So what about the boy?"

"She simply asked him to help in such a way that no one else finds out. And—the word of a professional—were anything to happen, the boy would let himself be cut to ribbons rather than give anything away . . . Anyway, he found Blackbird Hamlet and brought an oral message: next Friday Captain Beregond will be in the Red Deer tavern in the Settlement, waiting for a drunk man who will slap his shoulder and ask whether he is the one who commanded the archers of Morthond on the Pelennor Fields."

"What?! Beregond?!"

"Yes, if you can imagine that. We were no less surprised, believe me. You have to agree, though, that Aragorn's people aren't likely to bait a trap with someone so noticeable, so the Prince is doing everything right."

"You must all be crazy here!" Tangorn spread his hands. "How can you trust a man who first killed his suzerain and a month later is betraying his new lords?"

"Quite the contrary. First, he's innocent of Denethor's death, we know that for sure . . ."

"For sure? How? You looked into chicken entrails?"

"Yes, we did, but into a *palantír* rather than anyone's entrails. Long story short—Faramir fully trusts him now, and the Prince, as you know, is a good judge of people and not given to sappy sentimentality."

Tangorn leaned forward and even whistled in amazement. "Wait! Do you mean to say that Denethor's *palantír* is in Emyn Arnen?"

"Yep. Those folks in Minas Tirith have decided that it's broken. All they could see in it was the murdered King's ghost, so when Faramir asked for it as a memento, they were only too glad to get rid of it."

"All right . . ."

The baron stole an involuntary glance at the door to the next room, where Haladdin and Tzerlag were bedding down for the night. The

situation was changing rapidly; they were inordinately lucky recently, he thought fleetingly, not a good sign . . . Grager followed his glance and nodded in the same direction:

“Those two. Are they really looking for Faramir?”

“Yes. They can be trusted, since our interests are fully aligned, at least for now.”

“Well, well . . . A diplomatic mission?”

“Something like that. Forgive me, but I’m honor-bound . . .”

The chief of the Ithilienians contemplated this for some time, and then grumbled: “All right. You deal with them yourself, I’m busy enough as it is. I’m gonna take them out from underfoot to the most remote base, at Otter Creek, for the time being, and then we’ll see.”

“By the way, why did you give away precisely this base, at Blackbird Hamlet?”

“Because you can’t approach it stealthily, so we can always beat it. Besides, we have only a few guys here; it’s more of an observation post than a base.”

“How many people do we have?”

“You’re number fifty-two.”

“And they? . . .”

“Forty.”

“Can’t storm the fort, then.”

“Forget a direct assault,” Grager waved off the notion. “Whatever else, they’ll have enough time to kill the Prince in any event. Moreover, Faramir categorically demands that his freedom be attained with absolutely no bloodshed, so that no one dare accuse him of violating his vassal’s oath. No, we have another plan—an escape from Emyn Arnen; and when the Prince of Ithilien is under our protection, that’s when we can change our tune and tell the Whites to get lost.”

“Do you have a concrete plan?”

“Brother, you offend me—it’s almost fully implemented already! You see, Éowyn was our biggest problem: they’re only let outside separately, and the Prince won’t leave without her, of course. So we had to solve this puzzle: where can we arrange for both the Prince and the Princess to be, first, together, second, with no eyes on them, third, outside the fort?”

“Hmm . . . the bedchamber comes to mind immediately, if not for the third condition.”

“You’re almost right. It’s the bathhouse.”

“Wow!” Tangorn guffawed. “A tunnel?”

“Of course. The bathhouse is within the stockade, but away from the main building. We’re digging from a nearby mill, about two hundred yards straight, quite a bit of work. The biggest problem with tunnels, as you know, is what to do with all the dirt. With the mill we’re getting it out in sacks dusted with flour, it’s all very natural-looking. The danger is that the sentries might start counting the sacks from sheer boredom, and figure out that a lot more flour is going out than grain is coming in. So we couldn’t dig as fast as we could, but looks like we’ll be done this week.”

“And the White Company has no suspicions?”

“Beregond swears that they don’t. Of course, they won’t tell him anything of the sort, but he’d see some signs of an alarm.”

“Do they have informants in the Settlement and the hamlets?”

“In the Settlement for sure, but not in the hamlets, I don’t think. See, the White Company has a real communication problem outside the fort. The locals avoid talking to them (there’re all sorts of crazy rumors about them, including that they’re the living dead), which helps us a lot: every settler contact with the Whites stands out. They’ve wised up now and switched to dead drops, but before that they were burning their agents every day.”

“Is the tavern keeper working for them?”

“Looks that way. Makes our lives very difficult.”

“What about the merchants who travel to Gondor?”

“One. The other is my man. I’ve been waiting for them to try and recruit him, then we’d have their communication channel, but no luck so far.”

“You’re just watching them for now?”

“Not just watching. Now that we’re counting down the days, I’ve decided to cut their link to Minas Tirith—make them get a little busy. That’ll distract them some from both the miller and our hamlets.”

“Speaking of a link—anyone in the Settlement keep pigeons?”

Grager grinned. “One did, but his coop burned down. So it goes . . .”

“Wasn’t that too bold? They must’ve been furious.”

“Sure they were! But, like I told you, it’s the final countdown, speed matters. Besides, two sergeants investigated the arson, if you can imagine that, so now we know who’s in charge of counter-intelligence there . . . The only thing is,” the former resident spy said thoughtfully, staring at the lamp, “I’m really bothered by how easily I’m figuring out everything they do. Just put myself in their place: how would I

build a network in such a village? But this simply means that once they find out that we exist—which they will, and soon—they'll figure my moves out equally easily. So what we must do is move first . . . Aha!" His raised finger froze in mid-air. "Sounds like company! Looks like the boys from the fort have finally risked direct contact with Minas Tirith—I've been waiting for this for three days!"

The cart rolled down the highway in quickly gathering dusk, and its driver (the owner of the local grocery) kept getting chills behind the collar and in his sleeves. He had almost made it through the Owl Hollow—the most dismal stretch of the route between the Settlement and Osgiliath—when four shadows materialized noiselessly out of the impenetrably dark chestnut bushes on both sides of the road. The merchant knew the rules well and surrendered his purse with its dozen silver coins meant to purchase soap and spices to the robbers without complaint. However, the robbers didn't evince much interest in the money, telling the prisoner to disrobe; this was against the rules, but the blade against his chin discouraged any discussion. The grocer was really scared—cold-sweat scared—only when the leader, after poking the soles of his boots with a dagger, carefully felt his jacket, grunted in satisfaction and cut open one of the stitches. From there he deftly extracted a small square of fine silk, covered with runes barely visible in the dark.

The merchant was an amateur, so when the robbers threw a rope over a sturdy branch, he committed a gaffe of monumental proportions by claiming to be a King's man. What did he expect to accomplish? The night killers only traded puzzled looks: their experience suggested that the King's men were just as mortal as all others, provided they were hanged properly. The one who was fashioning the noose observed drily that espionage was not a game of darts at the Red Deer with only a couple of beers at stake. Strictly speaking, he further observed while painstakingly tying a 'pirate's knot' (in full view, so that the victim could observe the menacing preparations), the merchant was lucky. A failed spy usually wouldn't rate such a quick and relatively painless death; it's his good fortune that he's only a courier and knows nothing about the rest of the organization anyway . . . At that, the unfortunate grocer failed to hold either his bodily wastes or whatever he knew; as Grager's men supposed, he knew quite a lot.

The ‘robbers’ traded satisfied glances: they have done their job flawlessly. The leader led a horse out from behind a bush, gave a couple of curt orders and galloped away: Blackbird Hamlet has been waiting for this bit of silk for a long time. One of the others gave the quavering prisoner a look that was far from admiring and pushed his discarded clothing towards him with his boot:

“Over there, behind the trees, is a little stream. Go clean yourself up and get dressed—you’re coming with us. I’m sure you can imagine what’s gonna happen if your White Company buddies catch up with you.”

The cipher used to encode the dispatch was surprisingly simple. Upon discovering seven instances of the rare  rune in a relatively short message, Tangorn and Grager understood immediately that they were dealing with a so-called direct substitution (nicknamed ‘simple gibberish’)[45], where one rune is always replaced with only one other throughout the text. Typically, a predetermined number is added to the number of all fifty-eight runes constituting the Certhas Daeron; for example, if the step is ten.  (number 11) replaces  (number 1),  (number 7) replaces  (number 55), and so on. This cipher is so primitive that in the South it is used, at most, to encode secret love letters. Having figured out the step on the second try—fourteen, the date of the message—Grager cursed elaborately, reckoning it an attempt at disinformation.

The message was anything but disinformation, though. In it, one Cheetah, captain of His Majesty’s Secret Guard, was informing his ‘colleague Grager’ that their game had reached an apparent impasse. Certainly Grager could roll up Cheetah’s intelligence network outside the fort and greatly impede communications with Minas Tirith; however, this would not advance his ultimate goal even a little bit. Would it not make sense for the two of them to meet, either in Emyn Arnen (with safe conduct guarantees) or in one of the hamlets of the Baron’s choosing?

CHAPTER 26

Ithilien, Emyn Arnen

Night of May 14, 3019

"Listen, so you say that Princess Allandale didn't really exist, that this Alrufin dreamed her up . . ." Éowyn was sitting in the armchair with her feet up, her slender fingers intertwined over her knees and a funny frown on her face. The prince smiled and, perching on the arm, tried and failed to smooth out the frown with his lips.

"No, Far, wait, I do mean it. She's alive, you see—really alive! When she dies to save her friend, I want to cry, as if I had lost a friend for real . . . See, those sagas about ancient heroes are also great, but they're different, very different. All those Gil-galads and Isildurs, they're like . . . like stone statues, you understand? One can worship them, but that's it, while the Princess—she's weak, she's warm, you can love her . . . Am I making sense?"

"Plenty, honey. I think that Alrufin would have loved to hear you say this."

"Allandale must've lived in the beginning of the Third Age. No one but a few chroniclers even knows the names of the *konungs* who ruled Rohan back then; so who's more real—they, or this girl? Hadn't Alrufin—scary to say!—exceeded the might of the Valar?"

"Yes, in a way he has."

"You know, I just thought . . . what if someone as mighty as Alrufin writes a book about the two of us—this can happen, right? Then which Éowyn will be the real one—I or the other?"

Faramir smiled. "I remember when you asked to explain, on a 'stupid woman level', what philosophy is. Well, your thoughts are just that—philosophy, albeit a tad naïve. You see, lots of people have

thought about these things, and not all of the answers they've come up with are worthless stupidity. For example . . . Yes, come in!" he called out to a knock on the door, and glanced at Éowyn in puzzlement: it's night already, who might want something?

The man who entered wore the black parade uniform of the Gondorian Guards of the Citadel (this had always intrigued the prince: White Company wearing black uniforms), and Faramir felt trepidation: they must have made some serious mistake. He told Éowyn to go into the next room, but the guest politely requested that she stay: what they will be discussing directly involves Her Highness.

"First, allow me to introduce myself, albeit a little late. I don't have a name, but you can call me Cheetah. I'm a captain of the Secret Guard, rather than a sergeant—here's my badge—and I'm in charge of counter-intelligence here. A few minutes ago I have arrested the Commandant of Emyn Arnen on charges of conspiracy and treason. However, it's possible that Beregond had merely followed your orders without thinking about them too much, which would lessen his guilt. This is what I would like to establish."

"Could you please express yourself clearer, Captain?" Not a muscle twitched in Faramir's face when he fearlessly met Cheetah's gaze—empty and terrifying, like that of all White Company officers; whereas if one discounted the matter of the eyes, the captain's face was quite likeable—manly and a little sad.

"Prince, it appears to me that you understand my responsibilities incorrectly. On the one hand, I must protect your life at all costs—I repeat, at all costs. Not because I like you, but because such are my King's orders. Rumor will ascribe any misfortune that befalls you to His Majesty; why should he have to pay someone else's bills? On the other hand, I must avert all attempts to persuade you to break your vassal's oath. Imagine that a band of fools attacks the fort and 'frees' you in order to turn you into the banner of Restoration. Should even one of the King's men die when that happens—and some will most certainly die—His Majesty would be unable to ignore such an event for all his wishing otherwise. The Royal Army will enter Ithilien, which will most likely plunge the Reunited Kingdom into a bloody civil war. So please consider my task here to be guarding you from possible folly."

Strangely, something in Cheetah's manner of speaking (the tone? No, more likely phrasing . . .) made Faramir feel that he was once again talking to Aragorn.

“I greatly appreciate your concern, Captain, but I fail to see what this has to do with Beregond’s arrest.”

“You see, some time ago at the Red Deer he met a tall slender man with a long scar on his left temple and one shoulder noticeably higher than the other. Perhaps you know who I mean? That’s a distinctive look.”

“Frankly, no, I can’t remember,” the prince smiled, trying to keep the smile open and straight. “Perhaps it’s easier to ask Beregond himself?”

“Oh, Beregond will have to answer a whole host of questions. However, Prince, your forgetfulness is truly surprising. I can understand that Faramir, Captain of the Ithilien regiment, may not remember all his soldiers, but the officers and sergeants? I repeat—this man has a distinctive look.”

“What does the Ithilien regiment have to do with this?”

“What do you mean: ‘what’? You see, after the war many of those who had fought in the ranks of that remarkable unit didn’t come home to Gondor. Especially remarkable is the total absence of returned officers and sergeants, about fifty in all. Some must have been killed in the war, but surely not all! Where do you think they all could’ve gone, Prince—perhaps here, to Ithilien?”

“Perhaps,” the prince shrugged. “But I have no idea.”

“Exactly, Prince, exactly—you have no idea! Please note that it’d be completely normal and natural for those people to come to Ithilien, where they had started their service and where their beloved Captain is now Prince; it’s no secret that you were truly beloved in that regiment. But somehow not one of them showed up in Emyn Arnen officially to introduce himself and ask to join your service. Surely you agree that this is beyond unnatural, but rather suspicious! It’s logical to suppose that the regiment is still a well-regulated fighting unit that has gone underground, and now these people are planning your ‘liberation’. I think we’ve already established what would happen then.”

“These thoughts of yours are very interesting, Captain, and have their own logic, but if those are the only proofs of Beregond’s guilt that you have . . .”

“Please, Prince,” Cheetah frowned, “we’re not at a jury trial! The thing that concerns me now is the real guilt of this amateur conspirator, rather than the legal niceties. Immediately a question arises: how could the Commandant, who had only served in Minas

Tirith, contact Sergeant Runcorn, the free shaft who had spent the entire war in Ithilien's forests? Someone must've introduced them, even if indirectly, and you're the prime suspect, Prince . . . Now: did Beregond act on his own or did he, as seems more likely, carry out your orders?"

It's over, Faramir realized. Why did they have to send Runcorn to make contact? He is indeed easy to identify from a description. Sergeants' descriptions—these guys are really digging deep . . . The Red Deer, too, is apparently covered better than I thought. We lost completely, but the price we pay will be different: I will go on being an honored prisoner, while the Captain will die a tortuous death. The worst thing is that I really can do nothing for him; I have to abandon Beregond to his fate and live with the knowledge of this betrayal.

It's a stupid illusion that there can be any negotiations with the victorious enemy. One can gain nothing in such negotiations, either for himself or others; they're always conducted under the principle of 'what I have is mine and what's yours is also mine.' Which is why there's a cast-in-stone rule of clandestine warfare: in all circumstances, either be silent or deny everything, including your own existence. Should I admit any role in these contacts, I will not save Beregond and only speed up the destruction of Grager and his men.

All of these thoughts went through the prince's mind like a whirlwind, and then he raised his gaze to meet Cheetah's and said firmly: "I have not the slightest idea of the Commandant's contacts with the members of the Ithilien regiment, had those indeed taken place. You very well know that we have not exchanged more than a dozen words during this time; after all, this man killed my father."

"In other words," the counter-spy summed up drily, "you do not wish to spare your man the torture, if not death?"

He knew what he was risking, Faramir thought, and responded: "If, indeed, there is treason involved—of which you have not yet convinced me!—then Captain Beregond must be punished severely." Then, choosing his words carefully, he finished: "As for myself, I am ready to swear by the thrones of the Valar that I have never considered breaking my word, nor will ever consider doing so: duties to the suzerain are indissoluble."

"All right," Cheetah drawled thoughtfully. "What about you, Éowyn? Are you ready to betray for the sake of your goal and toss your man to the wolves? Actually," he sneered, "what am I saying here? So a mere officer, a commoner, will go to the rack; big deal for

someone of royal blood, who in any event is safe!"

An ability to control her facial expressions was not one of Éowyn's many fine qualities—she paled and looked helplessly at Faramir. Cheetah had zeroed in on the chink in their armor: the girl was physically incapable of pretending indifference when a friend was in danger. Faramir tried to warn her with his gaze, but it was too late.

"Now listen to me, both of you! I'm not interested in confessions—I'm a counter-spy, not a judge. All I need is information about the locations of the Ithilien regiment fighters. I do not intend to kill these people; I really am trying to avoid bloodshed. You'll have to take my word for it, since you've lost and have no other options. I will get this information out of you, whatever it costs. Certainly no one can interrogate in the third degree the sister of the King of Rohan, but you can be sure that I will make her watch the torture of Beregond, whom you betrayed, from the beginning to the bitter end, by the silence of Mandos!"

In the meantime the prince was absent-mindedly playing with his quill atop an incomplete manuscript, as if not noticing that his left elbow had nudged an unfinished cup of wine to the very edge of the table. In another moment the cup will crash to the floor, Cheetah will involuntarily glance at it—then he'll vault over the table and go for the counter-spy's throat, and devil may care . . . Suddenly the door opened without a knock and a White Company lieutenant strode quickly into the room; two soldiers appeared in the gloom just beyond the threshold. Late again, Faramir thought with a sense of doom, but the lieutenant paid him no heed, instead whispering something apparently very surprising into Cheetah's ear. "We'll continue our conversation in ten minutes or so, Prince," the captain said, heading to the door. The lock clanged, the sound of marching boots faded quickly into the distance, and quiet fell—a kind of uneasy, confused quiet, as though it realized its fleeting quality.

"What're you looking for?" She was surprisingly calm, even serene.

"Anything that can serve as a weapon."

"Yes, that's good. Find anything for me?"

"See, baby, I got you into this and couldn't save . . ."

"Nonsense, you did everything right, Far; it's just that luck was on their side this time."

"Shall we say goodbye?"

"Yes, let's. Whatever happens, we've had this month . . . You know, it must be Valar envy: we had too much happiness."

“Are you ready, darling?” Now, after those few seconds, he was a totally different man.

“Yes. What should I do?’

“Look carefully. The door opens inward, the doorposts are inside, too . . .”

CHAPTER 27

Meanwhile, Cheetah was leaning on the battlement over the gates, his gaze fixed on Grager's hard hawk-like face, which he had previously known only from descriptions. The spot in front of the gate was lit with a dozen torches held aloft by riders in Ithilien regiment's camouflage cloaks from the Baron's entourage. The talks proceeded with great difficulty, or almost not at all; the 'esteemed treating parties' agreed on the need to avoid bloodshed and nothing else. With good reason, neither trusted the other worth a damn ("Suppose I simply capture you right now, Baron, thus solving all my problems?" "You'll have to open the gates to do that, Captain. Go ahead—open them, and we'll see whose archers are better . . ."); neither budged an inch from their preconditions. Grager demanded that the Ithilienians be let inside the fort to stand guard over Faramir. Cheetah wanted to know the locations of their forest strongholds ("Do you think I'm an idiot, Captain?" "Well, you're the one suggesting that I voluntarily let armed enemies inside the fort.") After about fifteen minutes of this back-and-forth they finally agreed that the White Company would request orders from Minas Tirith while the Ithilienians would let the courier through, and broke up the talks.

Someone else might have been fooled by this show, but not Cheetah. The moment he went up the wall and assessed the situation, he turned to the accompanying lieutenant and gave a quiet order: "Raise a quiet alarm. All available men to the courtyard. Everyone freeze and watch for an intruder; any minute now someone from the Ithilien regiment will scale the wall, most likely in the rear, under cover of all the talk-talk. Capture him alive—I will personally take apart whoever produces a corpse."

He was absolutely correct but for a couple of small details. The infiltrator chose the front rather than the back wall. Soundlessly he tossed a tiny grapple on a length of weightless elvenrope over the shoddy stockade (less than a dozen yards from the group at the gates,

where the dark pushed away by their torches seemed thickest by contrast), flew up like a spider on a strand, and then slid into the courtyard like a breath of night breeze right under the noses of sentries, who kept their attention and bows trained on Grager's well-lit men and expected no such chutzpah. Another small detail that Cheetah got wrong was that the man who was now trying to free the prince (an impromptu attempt conceived less than an hour ago of hopelessness and desperation) was not of the Ithilien regiment, but of the Cirith Ungol Rangers.

It rates a mention that Sergeant Tzerlag's unit identification had caused a greatly animated discussion at Blackbird Hamlet, both as to essence and as to appearances. "My friend, are you totally nuts?" was Grager's first reaction to Tangorn's sudden suggestion to use the 'visiting Mordorian professional' rather than an Ithilien Ranger to infiltrate Emyn Arnen.

"An Orc is an Orc! To trust the Prince's life to one . . . Sure, it's nice that he knows the fort layout—from when they were stationed here, right?—and can pick locks. But dammit, Baron—to let an armed Mordorian into the Prince's bedchamber with your own hands?"

"I'm willing to trust my own life to these two guys," Tangorn explained patiently. "I can't tell you about their mission, but please believe me: it so happens that we're fighting the same enemy on the same team, at least for now, and they're as interested as we are in getting Faramir out from under the White Company."

Be that as it may, working in intelligence had long ago taught Grager that a temporary alignment of interest can sometimes produce a totally unbelievable alliance and that oftentimes one can trust a former enemy more than certain friends. In the end he assumed all responsibility, formally enlisted Tzerlag into the Ithilien regiment 'for the duration of the raid on Emyn Arnen' and handed the Orocuen the appropriate paperwork in case he got caught by the Whites. The sergeant only snorted—a captured Orc will get short shrift in any case; better to hang as a Mordorian insurgent than a Gondorian conspirator—but Haladdin told him to mind his own business.

". . . And remember, Sergeant: no killing when taking down sentries and such! Treat this as a war game."

"Very nice! Do those guys understand it's a war game?"

"I hope so."

"All right. I guess they'll hang me with a pretend rope . . ."

They say that there are werewolves- *nin'yokve*[46] in the countries

of the Far East—a fearsome clan of super-spies and super-assassins capable of mutating into animals internally, while keeping their human appearance. Turning into a gecko, a *nin'yokve* can climb a smooth wall against all laws of physics, slither into any crack after turning into a snake, and should the guards catch up with him, he turns into a bat and flies away. Tzerlag had never had any *nin'yokve* skills (despite Tangorn's possible suspicions), but the leader of a scouting platoon of the Cirith Ungol Rangers knew quite a few tricks involving no magic.

In any event, by the time the White Company soldiers have been roused and took their positions in the courtyard, he had already scaled one of the outside galleries and was now working on its lock, trading the grapple for other tools. The Sergeant did not have the skills of a real burglar, but he did know a few things about metalworking, and as he remembered from last year, any lock in Emyn Arnen could be opened with a pocketknife and a couple of pieces of wire. A few minutes later he was gliding noiselessly through the dark and empty corridors (all the Whites are outside—very convenient!); the Orocuen had admirable visual memory and spatial orientation skills, but he saw that finding the Prince's bedchamber in this three-dimensional maze was not going to be easy.

. . . Freezing before every corner, zooming through open spaces like a lightning, climbing stairs sideways lest a step creak, Tzerlag had covered about a third of the way when his inner sentry, which was the only reason he had survived those years, moved its icy hand along his spine: *beware*! He immediately flattened against the wall and slowly moved sideways toward the turn about a dozen yards ahead. He could see no one behind, but the feeling of danger was still close and very clear; when the sergeant had made past the helpful turn, he was sweating thoroughly. He crouched and carefully extended a pocket mirror past the corner, almost at floor level—the corridor was still empty. He waited for a few minutes with no changes, and then he felt clearly: the danger receded, he could not feel it any more.

This did not calm him at all; he moved forward even more cautiously and ready for the worst.

. . . When Cheetah caught a fast-moving shadow in the corner of his eye, he plastered himself against the wall in exactly the same manner and cursed inwardly: they missed the intruder after all, the bastards! The captain's position was not that great: only three sentries to cover the entire huge building—one guarding Faramir and Éowyn, another

by Beregond, the third at the entrance to the cellar. Go get help from outside? The intruder might let the prince out in the meantime, and the two of them will screw things up thoroughly. Sound an alarm? No good: the intruder will vanish into this damned maze and get ready for battle, so the only way to take him would be with quite a few holes in him, which is highly undesirable. Yes, looks like the only real option is to follow the guest and take him down personally, hand-to-hand, something Cheetah knew very well indeed.

Once he made the decision, Cheetah suddenly felt the rush of long-forgotten joyous excitement, for what is more exquisite fun than hunting an armed man? He froze in amazement, listening to himself: yes, there was no doubt—he was feeling an emotion! So this process has a certain order to it, then. He had his memory back first (although he still could not remember what happened to him before he found himself in the second rank of the gray phalanx marching across the Field of Pelennor), then he regained the ability to make his own decisions, then he could once again feel pain and weariness, and now the emotions were back. I wonder if I will be able to feel fear, too? At this rate I might become human again, he chuckled to himself. All right, I have work to do.

Naturally, he did not go into the corridor the intruder had taken; quite possibly he had seen him, too, and was now waiting behind the next corner. Much better to make use of being the master here and being able to move much faster than the foe: no need to freeze and listen by every turn. I can go around and still be there first. Where's there? If the unwelcome guest is moving towards Faramir's room (where else?), then I should meet him at the Two Stairs Landing—he can't avoid it, and I will have at least three minutes to prepare.

As he expected, the counter-intelligence chief was the first at the landing; he took off his cloak and started painstakingly setting up the trap. I must morph into my quarry; so—if he's not a leftie, he will be moving along the left wall. Would I look at the spiral staircase that will suddenly appear on the right? Yes, definitely. Then I will be with my back to this niche? Precisely. What a beautiful niche—even up close it's hard to believe that it can hold anything bigger than a broom. Here, let's extinguish this lamp, so it's more in the shadow . . . wonderful, all set, that's where I'll stand. Now: I'm here, he's there, two yards off and facing away. Sword hilt to the back of the head? Damn, don't feel like it . . . not sure why, but intuition says no, gotta listen to intuition in this business. Hands, then—a chokehold?

Right hand grabs the hair at the nape, pull down to raise the chin, a simultaneous kick to the knee, left arm to the exposed throat. Reliable, but possibly lethal, and corpses don't talk much. *Hadaka-jime*[47], then, but for that it's preferable that he expose his throat himself—say, by looking up. How can we make him look up? Think, Cheetah, think . . .

. . . When Tzerlag reached the dim weirdly shaped widening of the corridor at the end of which he could discern stairs going left, the premonition of danger returned with such force that he almost became dizzy: the unknown foe was somewhere very close. He watched and listened for minute—nothing; moved forward slowly, in small steps, noiselessly (damn, maybe to hell with their orders, get out the scimitar?) and froze: a large opening appeared on the right, with a spiral staircase through it, and there was definitely something behind those stairs. He glided by the left wall, his eyes on the opening—who the hell's there?—and stopped, almost laughing out loud. Whew! It's just a sword, leaned against the wall behind the stairs by one of the Whites. A strange place to keep a personal weapon, though. Maybe it's not leaned, actually—judging by the angle, it might've slipped down from upstairs. By the way, what's that there on the top step?..

Tzerlag's inner sentry yelled: *behind you*! only a split second before the foe's hands locked around his neck. The sergeant only had time to flex his neck muscles. Moving precisely, like in training, Cheetah grabbed his throat with the crook of the right arm, then the counter-spy's right hand locked on his left bicep, while the left pushed against the back of his neck, crushing throat cartilage and pinching the arteries. *Hadaka-jime*—unbreakable stranglehold.

Game over.

CHAPTER 28

Banal though it sounds, everything has its price. The price of a warrior is the amount of time and money (which are really the same thing) it takes to train, arm, and equip another one to replace him. In every epoch it is useless to increase the level of training beyond a certain threshold where a basic competency is achieved, since total imperviousness is anyway impossible. What good does it do to spend the effort to turn a regular infantryman into a first-class fencer when this will not save him from a crossbow bolt or, worse, a bout of wasting diarrhea?

For example, take hand-to-hand combat. It is a very useful skill, but perfection takes years of constant training, whereas a soldier, to put it mildly, has plenty of other responsibilities.

There are several options here; the Mordorian army approach was to teach only about a dozen techniques, but to teach those twelve combinations of movements almost down to the level of the kneejerk reflex. Of course, it is impossible to foresee all eventualities, but the method for breaking a rear stranglehold is definitely among the said dozen techniques.

Step one!—a swift move back; stomp heel into the top of the foe's foot, crushing its bird-thin bones encased in myriads of nerve endings. Step two!—bend the knees slightly, small turn of thighs, slide out of the grip suddenly weakened by horrible pain, down and slightly to the right, until there is room to drive the left elbow into his groin. Once the foe's hands drop to his hammered genitals, there are a few options available; for example, Tzerlag's step-three training had been to smash open palms over the opponent's ears: burst eardrums and a guaranteed knock-out. This ain't no exquisite ballet of the far-eastern martial arts, where the hieroglyphs of each position are but notation marks for the music of the Higher Spheres; this is Mordorian hand-to-hand combat, where everything is simple and to the point.

First he kneeled and pulled up the eyelid of the spirited White

Company sergeant (good, the pupil is reacting, Grager's order had not been violated), and only then allowed himself to lean against the wall in momentary exhaustion. Squeezing eyes shut, he forced himself to swallow against the pain: thank the One, the throat is intact. What if the guy had a garrote?

It'd've been the end for sure. How did I screw up so badly? More importantly, how did he figure me out? Wait, this means that they'll be waiting for me at Faramir's door, too . . .

. . . The Dúnadan sentry in the corridor leading to the Prince's bedchamber heard heavy dragging footfalls on the stairs. A rustle, a muffled moan, then quiet . . . unsure footfalls again . . . He quickly backed into the corridor and drew his sword, ready to sound the alarm at any moment. The soldier was ready for anything, but when he saw Cheetah at the end of the corridor, bent over double and leaning on the wall, his jaw dropped. Sword at the ready, the sentry moved forward and quickly scanned the stairs which the captain just ascended—nothing; Great Manwe, who did this to him? Is it poison? Meanwhile, the captain lost what strength he still had, slid down the wall and was still, head down and still holding his belly; it was evident that he had walked the last few steps on autopilot. The Dúnadan looked at Cheetah with mixed amazement, fear, and—let's be honest—some glee. The vaunted Secret Guard! Homegrown *nin'yokve*, right . . . He looked at the stairs where the captain straggled from once more time and crouched down to examine the wounded man.

Weird, but when the hood covering Cheetah's face fell back, the soldier's first thought was that the almighty chief of counter-intelligence had for some reason known only to him decided to turn into an Orc. That was his first absurd thought and he had no time for a second one: the 'tiger's paw' strike which Tzerlag had chosen for this occasion is very effective, especially when administered from down up; nothing more was necessary. Pretty cruel treatment, no doubt, but there was no ban on injuries, only on killing; maybe we're playing a war game, but dammit, it's still not a picnic! After searching the sentry (no keys, but Tzerlag was not really expecting any), the sergeant fished his goodies out of the pack and got started on the lock.

Pulling up the too-long sleeves of Cheetah's jacket, he thought as he worked: to think that we made it through the entire war without this, but I had to do it now. *Laws and Customs of War*, paragraph two—using the enemy's uniform and medical symbols. This rates an instant

hanging on the nearest tree—rightly so, by the by. Well, it'll come in handy now—better to show up at the prince's as a familiar jailer, rather than some Orc. Aha! Here's what I'm gonna do: put the hood down again and hand him Grager's paper without a word. The lock finally gave way, and Tzerlag breathed easier: halfway done! He had worked on the lock kneeling, and opened the door from that position, before standing up. That was what saved him—otherwise not even the Orocuen's lightning reflexes would have been enough to block Faramir's strike.

It is fairly easy, obvious even, to hit a man entering a room from behind a doorpost (provided that it juts far enough from the wall), but there is a catch. A man best perceives whatever is happening at his eye level, so if you decide to hammer the visitor on the head with something like a chair leg, this move will surprise only a total amateur. This is why people in the know (such as the prince) do not go after brute strength. Instead, they crouch and strike horizontally, rather than vertically. The blow, as mentioned, comes out weaker, but it hits right where it counts; most importantly, it is exceedingly difficult to react to.

Faramir's script for the next scene was as follows: once Cheetah (or whoever enters first) bends over with pain, the prince would pull him into the room, beyond the left doorpost.

Éowyn, standing behind the right doorpost, behind the opened door, would shut and block it with all her weight. Those left outside would immediately try to break in, but their first attempt would likely be disorganized, giving the girl a good chance to hold it for a few seconds. Those few seconds should be enough for Faramir to knock Cheetah out and grab his weapons. Éowyn would move aside then; those assaulting the door would by then get organized enough to slam into it together—"on my mark!"—and tumble into the room, possibly falling over. Faramir would immediately stab one of them—no more joking around. This would likely leave no more than two Whites standing, and since the prince is one of the top twenty swords of Gondor, the royal couple's chances range from pretty good to excellent should Éowyn manage to grab the second sword. Then they would change into White Company uniforms and try to sneak out of the fort.

This plan had some weak spots (mostly where coordinated action was concerned), but overall it was pretty good, especially considering that its primary goal was death with dignity, with escape to freedom a

possible bonus. However, as already mentioned, the Orocuen was kneeling when he opened the door, so Faramir's first blow hit him in the chest and he managed to put up a block. Amazed by the prisoner's perceptiveness—just imagine recognizing an Orc under a White Company sergeant's hood!—Tzerlag somersaulted back into the corridor, but by the time he got to his feet Faramir was already out of the room and had cut off his retreat, while his improvised club was a whirl of wood that was impossible to block. When a moment later that blond wildcat slipped behind his back, the sergeant was reduced to rolling around on the floor, dodging blows and calling out in the most undignified manner: "Friendly, friendly, Prince! I'm with Grager and Tangorn! Dammit, stop already!"

Then again, Faramir had already guessed something once he noticed the sentry lying down the corridor.

"Stand up!" he growled. "Hands on the back of your head! Who are you?"

"I surrender!" The sergeant smiled and handed the prince his 'enlistment chit.' "This is a message from Grager, it explains everything. You read while I drag this guy inside, we'll need his uniform."

"Cute," the prince grunted, handing Grager's paper back to Tzerlag. "So now I count an Orocuen amongst my friends?"

"We're not friends at all, Prince," the other objected calmly, "we're allies. Baron Tangorn . . ."

"What?! He's alive?"

"Yes. We had saved him back in Mordor. By the way, it was he who insisted that I go rescue you. Anyway, the Baron asked that you take the *palantír* when we leave the fort, as we're gonna leave it now."

"What the hell do they need it for?" The prince was surprised, but no more than that. He had yielded the initiative to the Ithilienians and switched to 'take this—go there' mode. He only nodded questioningly towards the Dúnadan whose jacket Tzerlag had already liberated.

"Yep, he's alive," the Orocuen confirmed, "just a little sleepy. The other one, down the corridor, is also alive. We abide by your 'no bloodshed' order very strictly." The prince only shook his head: looks like this bloke is reliable.

"You just mentioned having saved Tangorn. If so, I'm in your debt, Sergeant; that man is really dear to me."

"Whatever, we'll settle it," the other grunted. "Put on the uniform and let's go. We even have an extra sword now."

“What do you mean—‘extra’?” Éowyn finally spoke. “No way!”

The Orocuen glanced at Faramir questioningly, but the prince only opened his hands: no persuading this one. “Will we climb the stockade or try the gates?”

“Neither, Prince. The courtyard is chock-full of Whites, all in position and looking for trouble; no free pass there. We’ll try the tunnel.”

“The one in the wine cellar?”

“I don’t know of any others. Did Beregond tell you about it?”

“Certainly. Its door opens out but is locked from the inside, so it can be neither unlocked nor broken down from the outside—as is standard for any tunnel out of a fortress. There’s always a sentry at the cellar door: nothing unusual about that, wine needs guarding.

Beregond didn’t know where the key was and didn’t dare ask directly. Have you found the key?”

“No,” Tzerlag responded lightheartedly, “I’ll simply pick the lock.”

“How?”

“Exactly how I picked the lock to your door and a couple more on the way, and exactly how I’ll have to pick the lock to the cellar. That’ll be the most dangerous part, by the way: monkeying with the cellar door in full view. But should we quickly take down the sentry and open that door, we’re three-quarters done. You, Prince, will stand guard in your new uniform, like nothing had happened, while Éowyn and I drag the knocked-out sentry inside and I start working the lock in peace.”

“But that lock has to be hard to pick . . .”

“I don’t think so. It’s most likely heavy and sturdy—it has to be, if the door is to withstand battering from outside—which means not too complicated. All right, let’s go! Prince, did you take the *palantír*? We have to make it while the Whites are still waiting for me in the courtyard, and there’s only one sentry by the wine cellar.”

“Wait!” Éowyn spoke again. “What about Beregond? We can’t leave him here!”

“Oh, so Beregond has been arrested? We didn’t know that.”

“Yes, just now. They know everything about him.”

Tzerlag thought for only a couple of seconds: “No can do. We don’t know where he’s being held and will spend too much time looking. Tonight Grager will grab every single one of Cheetah’s men in the village, so if we free the Prince, tomorrow we’ll trade Beregond. But if we don’t get you out, he has no chance.”

“He’s right.” Faramir tightened the cinch of the sack with the *palantír* and hoisted it on his shoulder. “Let’s go, in Eru’s name!”

. . . The Dúnadan standing guard at the wine cellar scanned the large dimly lit hall. The main entrance to the fort was on his left, to the right were the three main stairs leading to the north and south wings and to the Knights Hall. What a strange decision: putting the entrance to the cellar by the front entrance, rather than in some hidey hole. Then again, everything in this here Ithilien is weird and unnatural. Start with the Prince, who’s not even a prince but rather a who knows what, and end with the rules of their White Company: whoever heard of passing officers off as sergeants and privates? It’d be one thing if it was a secret from the enemy, the local terrorists, say (although no one has seen any yet), but it’s from each other!

Allegedly we’re in the same army, but we’re not supposed to know that Sergeant Gront is really a captain, while our Lieutenant His Grace Sir Elvard is passing as a private! Funny, but the Secret Guard guys probably still don’t know about Sir Elvard; like they told us at the briefing: the Secret Guard has its business while His Majesty’s Royal Dúnadan Guard has its own . . . I dunno, maybe the spies like this setup, but to an honest soldier it’s like glass on stone. What if it turns out that the chief here is the cook or the butler—wouldn’t that be funny?

The sentry looked up: he could hear the approaching footsteps of two people in the uneasy silence of the deserted fort. In a few seconds he saw them: a private and a sergeant were coming down the north wing stair at a quick clip, almost running. They were heading towards the exit and looked very concerned; are they going for help? The sergeant was gingerly carrying a sack with something large and round inside it in outstretched arms.

Almost abreast with the sentry they traded a few words and split up: the private kept going towards the exit, while the sergeant apparently decided to show his find to the Dúnadan.

What’s he got there? Looks like it might be a severed head . . .

The rest happened so quickly that the sentry knew that something was off only when his hands were in a viselike grip, while the private who showed up behind his shoulder (to his astonishment, the sentry recognized Faramir) put a blade to his throat. “One word and you’re dead,” the prince promised without raising his voice. The Dúnadan swallowed convulsively; deathly pallor covered his face, and drops of sweat rolled down his temples.

The two impostors traded looks, and the ‘sergeant’ (gloomy Mandos! it’s an Orc!) smirked derisively: so this is the West’s fighting elite? The smirk turned out to be absolutely unwarranted: the young man desperately did not want to die, but in a couple of seconds he overcame his weakness and yelled: “Alarm!!” so loudly that echoes and clanging of arms rang back throughout Emyn Arnen.

CHAPTER 29

Cutting off the Dúnadan's yell with one short chop (the man did not even moan—just sagged to the floor like a sack of meal), the Orocuen turned to Faramir and addressed a few choice words to His Highness, the mildest of which was 'damn idiot.' His Highness took it in stride; it was he who was suddenly overcome with sentimentality and tried to simply scare the sentry, rather than knock him out, as Tzerlag insisted. As usual, humanism only made things worse: the soldier got his predestined share of bruises and internal injuries anyway, but all for naught. Their situation seemed hopeless now.

In any case, there was no time to decide fault. Tzerlag instantly ripped off the sentry's black cloak, tossed it to just-arrived Éowyn and snarled, pointing at the cellar door: "Stand there, both of you! Swords at the ready!" while he swiftly dragged the Dúnadan to the center of the hall. The six soldiers who burst in a few seconds later found the leftovers of a very recent fight: the sentries at the cellar door stood ready to handle any further attack, while another Dúnadan was motionless on the floor; the sergeant kneeling by his side barely glanced at them, pointed imperatively towards the south stair and again bent over the wounded man. The soldiers ran where they were told to go, boots thundering, almost kicking the Orocuen with their scabbards. The group had a break of a few seconds.

"Shall we fight our way to the stockade?" The prince was clearly looking for a nice quick way to lose his head.

"No, stick to the original plan." Tzerlag got out his tools and began studying the lock.

"But they'll immediately know what we're doing!"

"Yep . . ." The pick went into the keyhole and began feeling out the pins.

"So what then?"

"Three guesses, philosopher!"

"Fight?"

“Good boy! I’ll be working and you’ll be protecting me—just as our estates are supposed to do . . .”

Despite everything, the prince laughed: this guy was definitely to his liking. Right then, there was no time for laughing any more. The brief respite ended the way it had to: two confused Dúnadans came back down the south stair—who are we hunting, Sergeant?—and three real White Company sergeants appeared in the door. Those twigged to the situation right away and yelled: “Freeze! Drop your weapons!” and everything else one is supposed to yell in such circumstances.

Tzerlag kept working on the lock with great concentration, detachment even, ignoring everything happening behind his back. The conversation that started up was totally predictable: “Surrender your sword, Your Highness!” “Try taking it!” “Hey, who’s over there—come here!” He only glanced back, and then only for a moment, when the crossing blades first rang out above his head. Immediately the three White sergeants fell back; one of them, grimacing with pain, was carefully hugging his right hand under his arm, and his weapon was on the floor—the ‘magic circle’ erected by Faramir’s and Éowyn’s swords performed flawlessly so far. The prince, in turn, had no chance to glance back—the half-circle of Whites, bristling with steel, was drawing close, like a pack of wolves around a deer—but a short time later he heard a metallic click and then Tzerlag’s strange chuckle.

“What’s happening, Sergeant?”

“Everything’s fine, but just imagine this picture: the crown prince of Gondor and the sister of the King of Rohan are covering some Orc’s back with their lives . . .”

“Indeed it’s funny. How’s it going?”

“All set.” Behind them, there was a creak of rusted hinges and a whiff of musty cold. “I’m going in; hold the door until my word.”

Meantime, the Whites have erected quite a barrier around them and froze. The prince clearly discerned growing confusion in their actions: where the hell is Cheetah and the rest of the commanders? Nevertheless, he was sure that those surrounding them were not attacking only because they were unaware of the tunnel’s existence. Finally, a private with a white band on his arm showed up and gave the prince a ceremonious bow:

“My apologies, Your Highness. I am Sir Elvard, lieutenant of the Dúnadan Royal Guard.

Perhaps you will find it possible to surrender your sword to me?”

“What makes you better than the others?”

“Possibly the Secret Guard had committed some offense against your honor. If that’s the case, His Majesty’s Royal Guard, as represented by me, offers its sincere apologies and guarantees that this will not happen again and that the guilty parties shall be punished. Then we could conclude this unfortunate incident.”

“Fish don’t swim backwards, Lieutenant. Her Highness and I have decided to leave this fort as free people or die trying.”

“You leave me no choice but to disarm you by force.”

“Go ahead, Lieutenant. Just be careful—you may cut yourself.”

This time the attack was more determined. However, while a certain line had not been crossed the Prince and Princess of Ithilien had an advantage: Éowyn and Faramir inflicted stabbing wounds to the extremities without hesitation, whereas their opponents so far did not dare do so. In a short time the attackers had three lightly wounded and the attack fizzled out. The Dúnedain fought unenthusiastically, and kept glancing at their lieutenant: give a clear order already! Cut these two down or what? The Secret Guard had taken position in the rear ranks, allowing Sir Elvard to take command (and responsibility), as the situation appeared untenable.

Then, just as Faramir congratulated himself on how good a job of buying time for Tzerlag they were doing, the man suddenly showed up by his side, scimitar in hand, and said in a lifeless voice:

“It’s a modern Umbarian lock, Prince, I can’t open it. Surrender before it’s too late.”

“It *is* too late,” Faramir snapped. “Tzerlag, can we save you somehow?”

The Orocuen shook his head: “Unlikely. They sure don’t need me as a prisoner.”

“Éowyn?”

“We will face Mandos together, darling—what could be better?”

“Then let’s at least have some fun first.” With those words Faramir advanced recklessly towards the ranks of the Whites, right at Sir Elvard. “Hold on, Lieutenant! By the arrows of Oromë, we’re going to splash your master’s robes with our blood—he won’t ever wash it off!”

The hall filled with ringing of blades and fierce yells (the fight was now such that it became clear—soon there would be first dead). That was when a voice sounded from somewhere on the north stair—seemingly quiet, but somehow penetrating the minds of all the combatants:

“Stop, all of you! Faramir, please listen to me!” There was something in that voice that froze the fight for a few moments, so that Cheetah (in someone else’s cloak, leaning on something like a crutch with his left hand and on a White sergeant’s shoulder with his right) managed to reach the middle of the hall. He stopped amid the frozen tableau and his voice sounded a command: “Go, Faramir! Quick!” A small shiny object tossed by his hand bounced off Tzerlag’s chest, and the amazed sergeant picked up a fancy double-headed Umbarian key.

The freeze thawed immediately. At the Orocuen’s command Faramir and Éowyn moved back towards the door, he himself disappeared into the cellar again, and Sir Elvard, who had finally understood what just happened, cried out: “Treason! They’ll escape through the tunnel!” The lieutenant thought for a couple of seconds, arrived at a final decision, pointed at the prince with his sword and shouted: “Kill him!” Things got serious in a hurry. It immediately became obvious that Éowyn, at least, would not be able to hold out for more than a couple of minutes: the girl fenced perhaps even better than the prince, but the captured Dúnadan blade was too heavy to suit her well. They had each sustained a glancing wound (he to the right side, she to the left shoulder) when they finally heard: “It’s open, Prince! Retreat one by one between the barrels! I have the sack!”

A few seconds later the prince followed Éowyn into the cellar. Right at the threshold he managed to strike a good blow at the attacking Dúnadan, broke contact and quickly backed into the darkness, right into a narrow aisle between empty barrels stacked three high.

“Faster, faster!” Tzerlag’s voice sounded from somewhere above him. The Whites were already in the door, their silhouettes clearly visible against the lit doorway, when there was a wooden rumble resembling an avalanche, and then it was dark—not a ray of light penetrated from the door. Faramir halted in confusion, but then the Orocuen materialized from somewhere by his side, grabbed his arm and pulled him further into the dark. The prince’s shoulders bumped the walls of the passage, Dúnedain yells and curses filtered from behind, and Éowyn was calling to them in alarm from up ahead. “What happened, Tzerlag?”

“Nothing much: I simply rocked the top barrels and brought them down to block the passage. Now we have at least a minute breathing room.”

The girl was awaiting them at a small, unusually thick door leading into a narrow and low (about five feet high) tunnel. It was so dark

that even the Orocuen could not see much.

"Éowyn, in there, now! Take the *palantír*! Faramir, help me . . . where the hell is it?"

"What're you looking for?"

"A beam. A small beam, about six feet; Grager's men were supposed to leave it on the other side . . . Aha, here it is! Did you close the door, Prince? Now we secure it from the outside with this beam . . . Come over, let's fit the other end in this hole here. Praise the One, it's an earthen floor, this will hold well."

A few seconds later the door shuddered under blows from the inside; they were just in time.

Upstairs in Emyn Arnen a major spat was in progress. Sir Edvard, pale with anger, screamed at the chief of counter-intelligence:

"You're under arrest, Cheetah, or whatever your name is! Know this, bastard: up North we hang traitors by their legs, so that they have time to think before dying!.."

"Shut up, idiot, it's bad enough already," the captain answered tiredly. He was sitting on a step, eyes closed, waiting patiently while another man fashioned a crude cast for his foot. A grimace of pain contorted his face from time to time: a broken foot is a truly horrendous injury.

"Anyway, you're under arrest," the Dúnadan repeated; then he glanced up at the Secret Guard officers arrayed in a semicircle behind their chief and felt a sudden fear—not that he scared easily. The seven figures froze in a strange immobility, and their eyes—usually dark and empty, like a dry well—suddenly shone with a scarlet shimmer, like a predator's.

"No, don't even think about it," Cheetah said, turning to his people, and the scarlet shimmer disappeared without a trace. "Let him consider me arrested, if that will make him feel better; a fight among the White Company is just what we don't need right now . . ."

Suddenly a din rose in the courtyard, then the door opened, and in walked the man whom they least expected to see, flanked by stunned sentries.

"Grager!" Sir Elvard said in astonishment. "How dare you come here? Nobody gave you safe conduct . . ."

The baron smirked. "It's you who's going to need safe conduct now. I am here by the order of my suzerain, the Prince of Ithilien," he stressed the last words. "His Highness is prepared to forgive all the evil you've done him and were about to do. Moreover, the Prince has

a plan that will allow His Majesty to save face and you to keep your heads attached."

CHAPTER 30

Ithilien, the Settlement

May 15, 3019

The morning that day was wonderful. The watercolor blue of the Ephel Dúath (what idiot had decided to cal then Mountains of Shadow?) was so transparent that their snowy peaks appeared to float in the air above the boundless emerald stretches of Ithilien. For those few minutes the fort of Emyn Arnen on a nearby hill became what its creators must have imagined it to be: a magical forest dwelling, rather than a fortress. The rays of the rising sun have magically transformed the meadow on the edge of the Settlement—the plentiful dew that had previously covered it like a coat of noble faded silver suddenly shone like a spread of uncountable diamonds; perhaps the early May sunrise had surprised the gnomes who had gathered here for their nightly vigil, so now they have fled to their mouse holes, abandoning their painstakingly arranged treasures.

Be that as it may, the three or four hundred people gathered at the meadow (mostly peasants and soldiers) were not inclined to think of the dew poetically: it had drenched them all, many teeth were close to chattering. Nevertheless, no one left; on the contrary, people kept gathering. Men from the distant hamlets joined the inhabitants of the Settlement; news that the White Company was leaving, changing the guard to the newly reconstituted Ithilien regiment, have traveled with lighting speed, and no one wanted to miss the show. Now they were looking at the two motionless ranks facing each other—one black, the other green—at the officers saluting each other with complex movements of bare swords—"I relieve you."

"I stand relieved."—and, amazingly, for the first time thought of

themselves as Ithilienians rather than settlers from Gondor, Arnor, or Belfalas.

The Prince of Ithilien was a little pale and did not seem too comfortable in the saddle (according to experts in such things); then again, there was no lack of pale faces and beclouded gazes among the White Company, either. ("Guys, betcha the party in the fort last night was a monster, eh?" "Yeah, see them three Whites in the back row on the right? You could prob'ly get buzzed from their breath; they look ready to keel over, poor sods.") In the meantime, Faramir thanked the White Company for faithful service, bid a ceremonious farewell to his personal guard, and addressed a speech to his subjects:

"Today we are seeing off our friends who have come to our aid in the hour of utmost need, when the fledgling Ithilien Colony was defenseless against the bands of bloodthirsty goblins and Wargs; our heartfelt thanks to you, Guards of the Citadel! ("Hey, cousin: bands o' goblins . . . ever see any 'round here?" "Well, cain't say as I had, but they say that the other day at the Otter Creek . . .") The memory of this aid will remain forever in our hearts, just as the Princedom of Ithilien will forever remain the vassal of the Reunited Kingdom and its shield beyond the Anduin. However, we will defend the Kingdom as we see fit; we dwell beyond the Great River, not in Anórien, so we have to live in peace and harmony with all the local peoples, whether anybody likes it or not. ("What's he talking about, cousin?"

"Well, I figger that, say, them Trolls in the Mountains of Shadow—word is they have iron like dirt, but not much lumber." "Yeah, I suppose . . .") Anyway. All hail the King of Gondor and Arnor! ("Weird, cousin . . ." "Hey, dumbass, see them roll out the barrels over yonder?

For a free drink I'll hail even His Majesty . . . Hurrah!")

. . . The messenger from Minas Tirith (a lieutenant of the Dúnadan Royal Guard) showed up at the meadow when the ceremony was in full swing, his horse all lathered and breathing hard. Sir Elvard, thoroughly cowed by the Secret Guard ("Oblige me by smiling, sir. Smile, you hear?!"), now helplessly watching this unheard-of treachery—surrender of a key fortress without a fight—looked up and a faint hope arose in his heart: His Majesty must have somehow learned about this rebellion and has sent him an order to polish off all those dyed-in-the-wool traitors—from Faramir to Cheetah . . . Alas, the message was indeed from Aragorn, but it was addressed to the captain of the Secret Guard. Cheetah broke the White Tree seal right

then and there and lost himself in reading; then he folded the message unhurriedly and handed it to Sir Elvard with a strange chuckle:

"Read this, Lieutenant. I think you'll find it interesting."

The letter was a set of detailed instructions on how the White Company was to proceed under the new circumstances. Aragorn wrote that the preservation of the *status quo* required identifying all the bases of the Ithilien regiment and destroying them in one fell swoop, so that not a single man would escape. The strike was to be lightning-fast and absolutely secret; as for who was to be blamed for this monstrous evil deed—the mountain Trolls, goblins, or Morgoth himself—that was up to the captain. However, should there be any doubts whatsoever as to the success of such an operation (for example, if critical time was lost and there were already almost as many Ithilienians as the Whites), then it was to be aborted. In that case they were to make virtue out of necessity: transfer the duty of guarding Emyn Arnen to the officers of the Ithilien regiment in exchange for Faramir's confirmation of his vassal's oath and return to Minas Tirith, leaving only their intelligence network behind. His Majesty reminded that Faramir's life was sacrosanct in any and all circumstances, and that anyone who would provoke an open confrontation between the Ithilienians and the White Company (which event would immediately cause a civil war in the princedom and tear apart the Reunited Kingdom) will be executed for treason. To put it succinctly: once you start the job, finish it, but don't start if you're not sure.

His Majesty wrote in a post-scriptum: "There are many sovereigns in this world who love cloaking their orders in hints in order to later blame those doing their will for 'misunderstanding orders.' Be it known that Elessar of Valandil is not one of them—he always accepts responsibility and calls things what they are, and his orders say only what they say. Should there be found among the White Company any officers who—motivated by excess zeal—would mistake explicit bans for a veiled desire of the King, Captain Cheetah is to neutralize any such officer at any cost."

"As you can see, Lieutenant, by letting you live during your escapades last night, I was going against the King's orders, to some extent."

"So you've known about this order?" Sir Elvard looked at Cheetah with superstitious fear.

"You're overestimating my abilities. It's just that, unlike you, I can figure at least two moves in advance."

". . . They're leaving! Look, they're really leaving!" Grager breathed finally, watching the column of Whites take to the Osgiliath Highway. He kept the fingers of his left hand crossed in a special way, just in case. "To be honest, I didn't quite believe it and kept waiting for some treachery to the last moment . . . You're a genius, Your Majesty!"

"That's 'Your Highness,' Baron, and please keep in mind—I absolutely will not tolerate any joking in this matter."

"My apologies, Your Highness."

"However," Faramir looked over the Ithilien regiment fighters gathered around him with a slight smile, "each one of you is hereby entitled to address me as 'my Captain,' for old times' sake. Obviously, this will not be a hereditary privilege. All right, guys. Her Highness will show you to the castle—the food is served and the bottles are uncorked—while myself and the officers and . . . erm . . . our Eastern guests will catch up with you in ten minutes or so . . . So what were you wishfully saying there, Baron Grager: you really think that they've left?"

"No, my Captain. Their spy network . . ."

"Yes, exactly. What do you propose to do about it?"

"Nothing, Your Highness."

"Explain."

"Sure. It makes no sense to prosecute those of Cheetah's people that we've identified: since Ithilien was and is a vassal of Gondor, they've committed no crime by working for the monarch of the Reunited Kingdom. Sometimes in such circumstance you do away with a spy quietly, but that's an extreme measure: by doing so we'd announce to Minas Tirith that we're at the very least openly hostile, if not at war with them. Most importantly, Prince, I'm almost certain that we have not identified the entire network. Should we arrest the ones we know, we'd allow them free use of any remaining agents. Whereas if we touch nobody, it'll be impossible to figure out which ones we know about and which we don't, so they'll have to consider the entire network compromised. Even if they don't simply abandon it, they'll for sure put it to sleep for a long time. At least I wouldn't touch such a semi-compromised network with a ten-foot pole."

"Very well; this will be your call now, Baron Grager. I hereby promote you to Captain and grant you the requisite powers."

"Wow!" Tangorn laughed. "I see that the setup of the state of Ithilien is proceeding in an unusual fashion—its first institution is the counter-intelligence service!.."

Faramir shrugged: “With neighbors such as these . . . In any event, I doubt that this is of much interest to our guests. Tzerlag, where are you?.. I have to admit to a certain difficulty: your exploits of last night definitely make you worthy of a knighthood, but that would create a host of technical problems. In any event, what use is Gondorian knighthood to a desert warrior?”

Tzerlag shook his head. “No use, Your Highness.”

“See? Well, I guess there’s no choice but to fall back onto the ancient legends: ask your heart’s desire, Sergeant! But please keep in mind that I don’t have daughters of marriageable age yet, and as for the Prince’s treasury . . . what do we have there, Beregond?”

“A hundred thirty six gold pieces, Your Highness.”

“Yeah, not quite the Hoard of Vendotenia . . . Perhaps you’d like to think about it, Sergeant?

Oh, by the way, I have another debt to pay—for your rescue of this fair sir.”

The Orocuen was abashed. “I’m sorry, Your Highness, but we . . . how should I put it . . . we’re kinda together, so our request will be mutual. Better let Baron Tangorn tell you; consider that I gave my rights over to him.”

“Ah so?” The prince looked over the three comrades with gay amusement. “This just keeps getting more interesting. I suppose it’s a confidential request?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“. . . As I understand it, Baron, you’re going to ask for the *palantír*,” Faramir began after they rode about twenty paces away from the rest of the group. He was gloomy, with no trace of amusement remaining on his face.

“So you’ve guessed already, Prince?”

“I’m not a total fool; why else would you ask me to escape with it? I just couldn’t imagine that you’re working together with these guys. So now I’ll have to hand a magic crystal over to Mordorians. A nice bind you got me into, no question.”

“That is not so, Your Highness. Haladdin is not in Mordor’s service anymore; he is acting by himself and on behalf of entire Middle Earth, if I may be so bold. The sad thing is that I don’t have the right to let you know what his mission is, therefore I ask you to trust my word.”

Faramir brushed it off: “That’s not what I’m talking about. You know that I’ve always trusted you; more than I trust myself, in some things. It’s just that—what if all three of you are someone else’s

puppets and that someone is using you for his own gain? Try analyzing this situation once more, this time as a professional spy, rather than a friend of Haladdin and Tzerlag."

"I've done so many times and have this to say: whoever had started this originally, Haladdin will only play his own game, and this guy is very, very resilient—take my word for it—even though he doesn't look the part. And another thing—I really like him, and I will do what I can to help him win."

After some thought the prince grumbled: "All right. Let's consider me persuaded. How can I help you three?"

"First, please accept my resignation," the baron began, and explained to puzzled Faramir: "I will have to visit Umbar for some time, and I plan to operate there as a private person, so as not to put Your Highness in a false light . . ."

CHAPTER 31

Gondor, Minas Tirith

May 17, 3019

"Her Royal Majesty the Queen of Gondor and Arnor!" the master of ceremonies announced and immediately vanished into thin air, like he hadn't been there at all. Palace servants everywhere seem to have a sixth sense in addition to formal training. Aragorn had nerves of steel (a necessity in his former profession) and concealed the true feelings that the expression 'Her Majesty the Queen' aroused in him perfectly well. Nevertheless, somehow the rascal seemed to feel that every time those words were uttered His Royal Majesty Elessar Elfstone had a fleeting desire to either turn the speaker over to the Secret Guard (the Valar spare us), or simply unsheathe the *Andúril* and split the offender in half.

Gods, how beautiful she was! No human language has words to describe her beauty, while Elves need no words. Actually, it was not her beauty as such, but her absolute star-like unattainability that was the leash which was used to guide him all these years, ever since he first got to the Enchanted Forest and met—by pure coincidence, of course—Arwen Undómiel, the Evenstar of Imladris, the daughter of Ruler Elrond himself. No one can find out now why the Elves picked him rather than any of the other innumerable Dúnedain princes (strictly speaking, almost every Dúnadan thinks himself a prince, tracing his lineage if not from Isildur, then for sure at least from Eärendur). Be that as it may, the Firstborn chose well: Aragorn performed his task with excellence.

Now he was looking at her with a feeling he had never had before: desperation. Any further struggle is useless; how long can he chase a

mirage? Yes, time to sum up, and there's no reason to lie to oneself. So: an obscure chief of northern rangers had won the greatest of all wars in the history of Middle Earth, ascended the throne of the Reunited Kingdom, and became the first among Western sovereigns—but none of that had brought him an inch closer to possessing this woman.

"What else do you want from me, Arwen?" He knew he was saying the wrong thing in the wrong way, but could do nothing about it. "I crushed Mordor and laid the crown of Gondor and Arnor at your feet; if that's not enough, I will spread our borders beyond the Rune Sea and the mountains of Vendotenia. I will conquer Harad and the other countries of the Far East and make you Queen of the world—just give the word!"

"Don't you want all that yourself?"

"Not any more. Now I want only you . . . You know, it seems to me that I was closer to you back then, in Rivendell . . ."

"Please understand," her face once again assumed an expression of weary compassion, like a teacher who has to explain a grammar rule to a dim student for the tenth time, "I may not belong to any man; don't torture yourself for nothing. Recall the story of Prince Valacar and Princess Vidumavi; your own chronicles say: 'For the high men of Gondor already looked askance at the Northmen among them; and it was a thing unheard of before that the heir to the crown, or any son of the King, should wed one of lesser and alien race.' No wonder it sparked a civil war. Whereas compared with the nobility of my heritage there's no difference even between Isildur and some black chieftain from Far Harad. But even that is not much compared to the real obstacle—our age difference. To me, you're not even a boy, but a baby. Would you take a three-year-old to wife, even if she looked like an adult?"

"So that's how it is . . ."

"Of course, and you're even behaving like a spoiled child. Bored with the royal power in just a few days, you now want a new toy—Arwen, the Evenstar of Imladris! Think about it—you want to trade even love for a handful of candy: the crowns of Men's kingdoms. After all those years of dealing with Elves, have you not understood that none of us wants power as such? Believe me, I see no difference between the crown of Gondor and this cup—both are just gem-studded pieces of silver."

"Yes, looks like I'm just a baby. And you've tricked me, back then in

Lórien, just like a baby."

"You have tricked yourself," she objected calmly. "Please remember how it happened."

In a moment a silvery fog covered the walls of the palace hall, blurry silhouettes of Lórien *mallorns* showed through, and he heard again Elrond's soft voice right next to him: "Perhaps my daughter will revive the rule of Men in Middle Earth, but no matter how much I love you, I will tell you this: Arwen Undomiel will not change the course of her fate for a small man. Only the king of Gondor and Arnor can become her husband . . ." The voice of the Ruler faded away, and Aragorn again saw Arwen before him—she had restored the hall to its former appearance with a casual wave of her hand.

"This was the precise statement, Aragorn son of Arathorn. It's the honest truth: only the king of Gondor and Arnor can become the husband of an Elvish princess, but did anybody promise that he will actually become one?"

Aragorn smiled crookedly. "You're right, as always. A baby such as myself could never think of such a thing—the Ruler of Rivendell trying to weasel out of his words! Well, he can find a loophole very well, better than any Umbar shyster."

"You were paid for your work in honest coin—the Re-forged Sword and the throne of the Reunited Kingdom."

"Yes, the throne I don't control!"

She frowned a little. "Don't demean yourself. You knew from the very beginning that you'd get an Elvish advisor once you ascended the throne."

"You mean a regent."

"Again you exaggerate. Besides, we met you halfway: Lórien sent you not just anyone, but myself as the advisor, so that to your subjects it looks like a regular dynastic marriage. You, on the other hand, have imagined who knows what and now desire to add the daughter of the Ruler of Elves to your collection of sluts!"

"You know that this is not so." There was nothing but weary submission in his voice now.

"Back in Lórien, when you accepted Barahir's ring from me . . ."

"Oh, that. Do you wish to remind me of the story of Beren and Lúthien? Understand already that this is a legend, and a human legend, at that—an Elf can only laugh at it."

"Thank you for the explanation. To put it bluntly, you consider love between an Elf and a Man to be bestiality, right?"

“Let’s end this stupid conversation. You have rightly mentioned the need to adhere to one’s agreements. Don’t you think that a second ‘accident’ befalling a man from my entourage in as many weeks is a bit much?”

“Oh, so that’s what you wanted to discuss.”

“Precisely, my dear. If you have imagined that Lórien is incapable of protecting the people working for it, we will teach your Secret Guard a lesson they’ll remember forever—if there’s anyone left to remember.”

Resurgent anger helped him come back to his senses, like the stink of smelling salts helps a man out of a swoon; the hex dispelled, and the Dúnadan was becoming himself again—a white polar wolf facing a pack of jackals. “Allow me to remind you, *my dear*, that you’re not the masters here—not yet. Let’s call a spade a spade: had your ‘entourage’ been a real embassy, all of them would’ve been expelled long ago ‘for activities incompatible with diplomatic status.’”

“You know,” Arwen said thoughtfully, “sometimes you’re undone by excessive logic—it makes you predictable. You wouldn’t have resorted to such measures without a dire need; therefore, the dead men have sniffed out something top-secret and extremely important.

Hence, all I need to do is determine what they were doing in their last days.”

“Any progress?”

“Oh yes, quite a lot! If one can call it progress. I’ll admit that we’ve tended to overlook your games with the dead; to be honest, no one believed that a mortal could master the Shadow Spell well enough to actually bring them back to life. But now you have decided to inherit the black knowledge of Mordor, too; you’re gathering those poisoned shards everywhere you can and expect to get away with it. There’s no denying that you’re a top-grade swashbuckler (that’s what we were choosing for among very many): highly intelligent, desperately brave, and totally merciless to others and himself. I know that you’re no novice at juggling live cobras, but believe me: you have never—by the Halls of Valinor!—never played a game as dangerous as this!”

“I’m also very practical. The thing is, those games are as dangerous to you Elves as to me; I’m glad that you’ve finally understood the danger. I am ready to undo it all if I’m properly paid.”

“Ah so? What is your price, then?”

“You already know the price, and there’ll be no other.”

Arwen walked away in silence, like a vertical ray of sun piercing a

dusty room; when she looked back at his soft: “Wait!” it was a victory greater than Pelennor or Cormallen.

“Wait,” he repeated, then carelessly tossed up the silver cup she had just used to illustrate her invective, caught and crushed it in a single movement like it was made of paper; the encrusted rubies burst through his fingers like drops of blood and rattled across the marble floor. “By the Halls of Valinor,” he repeated her words slowly, “I, too, no longer see a difference between the crown of Gondor and this cup; sorry that the crown wasn’t to hand.”

He tossed her the lump of silver so that she had to catch it and left without looking back. It looked like for the first time ever a battle went to him. Yes, she’s right—he’s playing the most dangerous game of all and isn’t about to turn back. He wants this woman, and he will have her, whatever the cost. This will never happen while Elves are Elves? Very well, then the whole foundation of their power must be crushed. This is a task of unimaginable complexity, but a lot more fun than, say, the conquest of Harad . . .

The voice of the guard on duty abruptly brought him back to reality: “Your Majesty! Your Majesty! The White Company is back from Ithilien. Shall I ask them in?”

. . . Aragorn sat silently, head down and arms crossed over his chest; Cheetah sat in front of him in an armchair, bandaged foot awkwardly turned aside. He had finished his unhappy report a few minutes ago and was now awaiting the verdict.

Finally His Majesty raised his gaze. “Under those circumstances your actions have to be judged as appropriate, Captain. I would’ve done the same thing in your place. Well, that’s no surprise.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Our shadow is your shadow.”

“You seem to want to ask something?”

“Yes. While in Ithilien we were bound hand and foot by the order to preserve Faramir’s life.

Don’t you think it necessary to revise . . .”

“No, I don’t.” The Dúnadan rose and strolled around the room thoughtfully. “You see, I have lived a turbulent life and am guilty of a multitude of sins, including some mortal ones . . . but I have never been an oath-breaker, and never will be.”

“What relevance does this have to real politics?”

“A very direct one. Faramir is an honorable man, so while I keep up my side of the bargain, he won’t abandon his, and I’m fairly satisfied with the *status quo*.”

“But now all who are unhappy with Your Majesty’s rule will gather in Ithilien!”

“Certainly, and that’s wonderful! This will rid me of opposition in Gondor—with no bloodshed, mind you. It will be Faramir’s problem now to make sure that those guys don’t do anything about restoring the old dynasty—he’s oath-bound, too.”

“So it doesn’t concern you that the Prince of Ithilien has already started some sort of murky dealings with the East?”

“This wasn’t in your report! Where did you get this information?”

“You see, the man who broke my foot was an Orocuen scout; the same night an Umbarian physician—Haladdin, I remember his name well—set it. Those men came from beyond the Mountains of Shadow together with the well-known baron Tangorn . . .”

“Hey! Describe this doctor to me!” Cheetah looked at Aragorn in surprise; the King leaned forward and his voice cracked a bit.

“. . . Yes, it’s him, without a doubt,” the Dúnadan murmured and closed his eyes for a few seconds. “So Tangorn had found Haladdin in Mordor and dragged him over to Faramir in Ithilien . . . Damn but you’ve kept the worst news for last! Looks like I have seriously underestimated that philosopher.”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, for not yet knowing—who is this Haladdin?”

“Ah. You see, you’re about to head a small top-secret group—Task Force Féanor; it is not even part of the Secret Guard and reports directly to me. Its strategic task for the foreseeable future is to gather knowledge left behind by Mordor and Isengard for our own purposes. You can’t make do with just the books in this business, you need the people, too.

A certain Doctor Haladdin is number eighteen on our list. Of course, it could be a coincidence that he met Tangorn, Faramir’s Umbarian resident, but I don’t believe in such coincidences.”

“Then you think . . . that Faramir is doing the same thing?”

“Usually, clever thoughts occur to smart minds simultaneously; by the way, the Elves are engaged in the same kind of search, to other ends, of course. The thing is that Faramir will have a much easier time searching thanks to his old connections in the East. That list we have is based on pre-war reports of his resident spies—praise Manwe that we, rather than the Elves, got the Royal archives . . . In any case, Captain—find this Tangorn immediately and get everything he knows out of him; then consider how to get our hands on whatever Ithilien

has. There's no task of greater importance now."

"An abduction right out of Emyn Arnen?" Cheetah shook his head dejectedly. "But that damned Grager has practically destroyed our network there, it can hardly handle such a task."

"Tangorn won't stay in Emyn Arnen. No doubt Faramir will send him to Umbar, where he had so much success before the war: it's full of Mordorian émigrés now, plus it's the best possible location for secret diplomatic missions. Certainly they've already hid Haladdin somewhere . . . actually, that's easy to check. I'll send a courier to Emyn Arnen right away—

I owe the Prince of Ithilien my best regards anyway. Should the messenger find neither Haladdin nor Tangorn there—which is what I expect—send your people to Umbar at once.

Get moving, Captain, and get well soon: there's plenty of work to do."

"So where is Wolverine now?"

"He's in Isengard, commanding a band of marauding Dungarians. His mission is obtaining 'blasting fire.'"

"What about Mongoose?"

"He's in Mindolluin, a prisoner in the quarry," answered the Task Force Féanor member tasked with briefing Cheetah, clarifying: "He's part of Operation Mockingbird, Captain. His extraction is planned for next Tuesday."

"Can we speed up the wrap-up of that operation?"

"No, Captain, sir. Mongoose is working without cover, and that quarry is the Queen's men bailiwick. Should we expose him, he'll be dead in five minutes or less: 'escape attempt' and finished."

"Very well," he estimated a courier's round-trip to Emyn Arnen, "this will keep till Tuesday.

Send him to me the moment he shows up."

CHAPTER 32

Gondor, Mount Mindolluin

May 19, 3019

From bird's eye view the Mindolluin quarry which supplied limestone to Minas Tirith builders looked like a chipped porcelain bowl, its inside covered by hundreds of tiny persistent ants looking for traces of sugar. On a nice day like today the white cavity functioned as a sunlight-gathering reflector, and its inner area, isolated from the winds, was hot as hell. And this in the middle of May; Kumai tried not to think of what it was going to be like in the summer. Sure, the prisoners who ended up in Anfalas, on the galleys, fared much worse, but that was not much of a consolation. He was actually very lucky today, drawing a work detail at the very top edge, where a refreshing breeze blew and there was almost no chocking calcium dust. Of course, those working on the outer perimeter of the quarry had to wear leg irons, but he found that an agreeable trade-off.

For the second week now Kumai's partner was Mbanga, a *múmak* driver from the Harad battalion, who did not speak Common. Over the last six weeks the overseers had kicked into him the knowledge of all the words they considered necessary and sufficient (up, go, carry this, roll that, hands on the back of your head); however, translating the expression 'lazy black ass' stupefied both sides, so they made do with 'nigger.' Mbanga was in kind of a permanent semi-dreaming state and did not seek to expand his vocabulary by communicating with the other prisoners. Perhaps he still mourned his perished Tongo—the *múmakil* and their drivers develop a human-like friendship, far beyond anything between a rider and his beloved horse. Or maybe in his mind the Haradi was in his unimaginably distant South, where the stars

over the savannah are so large that you can reach them with the tip of your *assegai* if you stretch, where any man can use simple magic to turn into a lion, and where every woman is beautiful and tireless in love.

. . . Once upon a time that area had been home to a mighty civilization, which left behind nothing but stepped pyramids overgrown with lush tropical greenery and roads paved with basalt plates leading nowhere. The modern history of Harad began less than a hundred years ago, when a young and energetic chief of a tribe of cattlemen from the interior named Fasimba[48] swore to destroy the slave trade, and succeeded. It must be noted parenthetically that the countries of the South and the East had slave trade since time immemorial, but not on any serious scale; it was limited to selling beauties to harems, plus other exotica that had no economic underpinnings. The situation changed drastically when the Khand Caliphate 'industrialized' the business, establishing a thriving trade in black slaves throughout Middle Earth.

A well-fortified Khandian colony candidly named Slaveport arose on the shore of a deep bay at the mouth of the Kuvango, the main river artery of Eastern Harad. Its inhabitants first tried hunting for slaves themselves, but quickly realized that this was a grueling and dangerous task; as one of them put it, "much like shaving a pig: lots of squealing, little hair."

Rather than abandon the enterprise, they have established profitable alliances with chiefs of the coastal tribes; one Mdikva became their main trading partner. From that point on, the live merchandise was in steady supply in Khand's markets, in exchange for beads, mirrors, and poorly distilled rum.

Many people had pointed out both to the inhabitants of Slaveport and their respectable agents in Khand that their method for making a living was dirtier than dirt. To that they responded philosophically that business was business and as long as there was demand it was going to be satisfied by one supplier or another (this line of reasoning is by now universally known, so there is no need to cite it in full). Be that as it may, Slaveport boomed and its businessmen got rich quickly, with the side benefit of being able to satisfy their most exotic sexual fantasies thanks to the unlimited supply of young black girls (and boys) in their temporary possession.

Such was the situation when Fasimba successfully poisoned six neighboring chiefs at a friendly party (actually he was the one

supposed to have been poisoned, but he skillfully struck first, as was his style), joined their domains to his own and declared himself Emperor.

After assembling the warriors of all seven chiefdoms into a single army and instituting both a unified command and capital punishment for any expression of tribalism, the young chief invited military advisors from Mordor, which jumped at the chance to establish a counterweight to its Khand neighbor. The Mordorians fairly quickly taught the black warriors, who knew neither fear nor discipline, how to function together in closed ranks, and the result exceeded all expectations. In addition, Fasimba was the first to fully appreciate the true battle potential of the *múmakil*; of course, they have been used in war since time immemorial, but he was the one to standardize and streamline the taming of calves in large numbers, thus essentially creating a new army service. The effect was similar to that of tanks in our day and age: one war machine attached to an infantry battalion is a useful thing to have, but no more than that, whereas fifty tanks gathered into a single armored fist is a force that drastically changes the nature of war.

Three years after Fasimba's military reform he declared a war of total destruction on the coastal chiefs that were involved in slave-raiding and crushed them all in less than six months; finally, Mdikva's turn came. Spirits were low in Slaveport when a messenger of the coastal kinglet came with good news: Mdikva's warriors have met Fasimba's vaunted army in a decisive battle and triumphed completely, and soon the town will receive a large shipment of good strong slaves. The Khandians breathed a sigh of relief and complained to the messenger that slave prices at the metropolis markets were down sharply (which was a total lie). The man was not overly displeased: there were so many prisoners that there would be enough rum to last half a year.

The slave caravan, personally led by Mdikva, arrived at the appointed time—a hundred eighty men and twenty women. Despite the messenger's boasts, the chained men had a poor appearance: worn-out, covered in bruises, their wounds haphazardly bandaged with banana leaves. However, the women, paraded totally naked at the head of the column, were of such qualities that the entire garrison crowded around them, salivating and unwilling to look at anything else. This proved their undoing, for the chains were fake, the blood was paint, and the slaves themselves were the Emperor's personal

guard. The banana leaf bandages concealed star-shaped throwing knives lethal up to fifteen yards, but the guardsmen could have done without any weapons: every one of them could outrun a horse in a short sprint, dodge a flying arrow, and break eight stacked tiles with a bare fist. The city gates were captured in mere seconds, and Slaveport fell. Fasimba commanded the whole operation himself: it was he who led the 'slave caravan' dressed in Mdikva's leopard-skin cape, well-known to the entire coast; the Emperor knew well that the members of the master race have never bothered to learn to tell 'all these blackies' apart. Mdikva himself had no further need of the cape; by that time, the ferocious fire ants in whose path he had been staked (this was now the punishment for slave-raiding) had already turned the coastal ruler into a well-cleaned skeleton.

Two weeks later a slave ship from Khand tied up at Slaveport. The captain, somewhat surprised by the deserted piers, went into town. He came back escorted by three armed Haradrim and in a voice shaky with fear told the crew to come ashore and help load the cargo. To be fair, the nature of the cargo they were to take on would have shaken anyone.

It was 1,427 tanned human skins: the entire population of Slaveport, save seven infants whom Fasimba spared for some unknown reason. Each skin bore an inscription made by the town's clerk (who was paid honestly by being killed last with a relatively easy death)—the owner's name and a detailed description of the tortures he had to endure before being skinned alive. The women's skins bore a notation of exactly how many black warriors have thoroughly appreciated their qualities; the town women were few and the warriors were many, so the numbers varied but were invariably impressive. Only a few inhabitants of Slaveport were lucky enough to merit a brief note 'died in battle.' The top of the bill was a stuffed effigy of the governor, a relative of the Caliph himself. Professional taxidermists probably would not have approved of the material used as stuffing—the very beads the Khandians used to pay for slaves—but the Emperor had had his reasons.

Some will say that such monstrous cruelty has no justification; the chief of the Haradrim must have simply passed off his personal sadistic tendencies as revenge on the oppressors.

Others will talk of 'historical retribution' and blame the 'excesses' on what the Haradrim, who were no angels, have suffered over the previous years. Such a discussion seems senseless on its merits, and is

in any event irrelevant in this case. What Fasimba did to the inhabitants of the ill-fated town was neither a spontaneous expression of the chief's cruelty nor revenge for ancestral suffering; rather, it was an important element of an fine strategic plan, conceived and carried out with a totally cool head.

CHAPTER 33

The Caliph of Khand, having received a gift of his subjects' skins and a stuffed relative, reacted in precisely the way the Emperor was counting on. He had the captain and crew beheaded (choose your cargo better next time!), publicly swore to have Fasimba stuffed in the same manner, and ordered his army to Harad. His advisors, forewarned by the sailors' sad fate, did not speak against this dumb idea; they did not dare to even insist on some scouting first. Rather than supervise preparations for the expedition, the Caliph indulged in devising the tortures he was going to inflict on Fasimba once he had him.

A month later twenty thousand Khand soldiers landed at the mouth of Kuvango next to the ruins of Slaveport and marched into the country. It should be mentioned that in terms of the amount of iron they had to carry (and especially the gold-plated doodads studding said iron) the Khand warriors were unequaled in all Middle Earth. The problem was that their battle experience was limited to putting down peasant revolts and similar policing actions. It looked like this was quite enough to deal with the black savages—the Haradrim fled in panic the moment they saw the menacing gleam of the iron phalanx. The Khandians chased the disorderly fleeing enemy through the coastal jungle and entered the savannah, where they met Fasimba's patiently waiting main force the very next morning.

Too late did the Caliph's nephew commanding the army realize that the Harad forces were twice the size of his and about ten times as effective. Strictly speaking, there was no battle as such; rather, there was one devastating *múmakil* attack, followed by a disorderly rout and chase of the fleeing enemy. The casualty tallies speak for themselves: a thousand and a half killed and eighteen thousand captured Khandians versus about a hundred dead Haradrim.

Sometime later the Caliph received from Fasimba a detailed description of the battle together with an offer to trade all the

prisoners for all the Haradrim enslaved in Khand.

Alternatively, the Caliph was advised to send to Slaveport a ship capable of taking on eighteen thousand human skins; by now Khand knew well that the Emperor was not joking.

Fasimba made another foresighted move when he freed about two hundred prisoners, who went home to inform the entire population of Khand as to the nature of Haradi offer. As was to be expected, the people became restless and the smell of rebellion was in the air. A week later the Caliph, whose forces have been reduced to his palace guard, gave in. The exchange Fasimba offered took place in Slaveport, and the Emperor acquired a status of a living deity among his people —for to the Haradrim a return from Khandian slavery was only a little short of resurrection.

Since then, the fearsome Harad Empire (which had neither a written language nor cities, but plenty of ritual cannibalism, gloomy black magic, and witch-hunting) had widened its borders considerably. At first the black warriors expanded only to the south and east, but in the last twenty years or so they have turned their gaze north and captured a significant chunk of Khandian territory, approaching closely to the borders of Umbar, South Gondor, and Ithilien. The Mordorian ambassador at the Emperor's court sent dispatch after dispatch to Barad-Dur: unless swift measures are taken, soon the civilized states of Central and Western Middle Earth will face a terrifying opponent—untold multitudes of excellent warriors who know neither fear nor mercy.

Therefore, relying on a Khandian saying 'the only way to get rid of crocodiles is to drain the swamp,' Mordor began sending missionaries South. Those did not bother the blacks with sermons about the One too much, rather spending their time treating sick children and teaching them arithmetic and reading, for which purpose they have invented a written version of the Haradi language based on the Common alphabet. When one of its creators, one Reverend Aljuno, read the first text created by a little Haradi (it was a description of a lion hunt, remarkable in its poetic qualities), he knew that he had not lived for naught.

It would be an obvious exaggeration to say that that these activities have resulted in a noticeable tempering of the local mores. However, the missionaries themselves enjoyed an almost religious reverence, and the word 'Mordor' elicited the most white-toothed of smiles from any Haradi. Besides, Harad (unlike some 'civilized' countries) had

never suffered from selective memory loss; everybody there knew full well who had helped them against the Khandian slave traders. That was why Emperor Fasimba the Third immediately responded to the Mordorian ambassador's request for help against the Western Coalition with a select force of cavalry and *múmakil*—the very Harad battalion that fought so valiantly on the Field of Pelennor under the scarlet Snake banner.

Only a few black men survived that battle, including the head of cavalry, the famous Captain Umglangan.[49] Ever since that day he had a recurrent vision, bright as day: two ranks facing each other in portentous silence upon a strange blue savannah, fifteen yards apart—the range of the *assegai*; both are comprised of the best warriors of all times, but the right line lacks one fighter. It's time to start, but for some reason Udugvu the Fearsome has mercy on Umglangan and is delaying the signal to begin this best of men's amusements—where are you, Captain? Take your place in the rank quickly!.. What is a warrior to do when his heart calls him to the foot of Udugvu's black basalt throne while the commander's duty orders him to report to his Emperor? It was a hard choice, but he chose Duty, and now, after surviving a thousand dangers, he has already reached the borders of Harad.

He brings sad news to Fasimba: the men of the North who were like brothers to the Haradrim have fallen in battle, and now there is nobody but enemies in the Northern lands.

But this is wonderful, in a way—now there are so many battles and glorious victories ahead!

He saw the warriors of the West in action, and there's no way they will withstand the black fighters when those are an army rather than a small volunteer battalion under the scarlet banner. He will report that the cavalry gap which had so concerned them is no more: not so long ago the Haradrim didn't know how to fight on horseback, and now they had acquitted themselves well against the best cavalry of the West. Nor do the Westerners know anything about Haradi infantry yet; of all he had seen there only the Trollish infantry could possibly match it, and now no one. And the *múmakil* are the *múmakil*—the closest thing to an absolute weapon. Had we not lost twenty in that cursed forest ambush, who knows how the tide might have turned at Pelennor . . . They're afraid of fire arrows? Not a problem, we'll take care of that when training calves. The West had chosen its fate when it crushed Mordor which stood between them.

. . . Mbanga the driver was concerned with a problem much less global in scope. Despite having no knowledge of mathematics, ever since that morning he had been working on a fairly complicated planimetric problem which Engineer Second Class Kumai (had he known about his partner's plans) would have described as 'minimization of the sum of two variable distances'—from Mbanga to the overseer and from the overseer to the edge of the quarry.

Of course, he is not Umglangan's equal to count on a place in the ranks of the best warriors of all times, but if he manages to die as planned, then Udugvu in his boundless mercy will allow him to forever hunt lions in his heavenly savannah. Carrying out the plan was not going to be easy, though. Mbanga, weakened by six weeks of near-starvation and hard labor, intended to kill with his bare hands a large man, armed to the teeth and far from absent-minded, in less than twenty seconds; if he took any longer than that, the other overseers would reach him and whip him to death: a piteous slave's demise . . .

It happened so quickly that even Kumai missed Mbanga's first move. He saw only a black lightning hitting the overseer's legs—the Haradi crouched as if to adjust his shackles and suddenly lunged headfirst; so does a deadly tree mamba strike its prey, penetrating a tangle of branches with astonishing precision. The black man's right shoulder struck the overseer's leg full force exactly under the kneecap; Kumai imagined actually hearing the wet crunch of the joint sack tearing and the delicate cartilage menisci snapping out of their sockets. The Gondorian sagged down without even a moan in pain shock; in a flash the Haradi had the unconscious man slung over his shoulder and hurried towards the precipice in a fast shackle trot. Mbanga beat the guards converging on him from all directions by a good thirty yards; having reached the coveted edge, he tossed his burden down into the shining white abyss and was now calmly awaiting his enemies, captured sword in hand.

Of course, none of those Western carrion-eaters dared cross blades with him—they simply showered him with arrows. This, however, was of no importance: he had managed to die in battle, weapon in hand, so he had earned the right to throw the first *assegai* in the heavenly lion hunt. What's three arrows in the gut compared to such eternal bliss?

The Haradrim always die smiling, and this smile boded nothing good for the Western countries, as some far-sighted men were already beginning to guess.

CHAPTER 34

"Bastard's dead!" the huge blond overseer concluded disappointedly after carefully crushing Mbanga's fingers with his heel (no reaction); then he trained his bloodshot eyes on Kumai, standing motionless to the side. "But devil take me," he tossed his whip from one hand to another, "if his buddy won't pay with his whole hide for Ernie right now . . ."

Kumai instinctively blocked the first blow with his elbow, immediately losing a patch of skin. Roaring with pain, he lunged at the blond man, and four others joined the fun. They beat him for a long time, attentively and with a great deal of inventiveness, until it became clear that further action was useless on the insensible Troll. Well, whaddya think—someone has to pay for the dead overseer, right?

By then the guard chief showed up, yelled: "Enough fun!" and chased them all back to their posts—he certainly didn't want another deader on his report. See, the deal's like this: if this animal kicks the bucket right here, then he'll have to deal with the master of the works (another asshole!), but if it happens later, in the barracks—then it's gonna be a 'natural loss,' no questions asked. He nodded for the nearest bunch of prisoners who had watched the beating fearfully to come over, and a short time later Kumai was sprawled over the rotten straw in his barrack. Anyone with experience could tell at a glance that this half-corpse covered in tatters of bloody skin was not for this world for much longer. A couple of months prior the Troll managed to cheat death after heavy injury in the Battle of Pelennor, but now his luck seemed to have run out.

. . . When Éomer's riders broke through the South Army's defenses and panic ensued, Engineer Second Class Kumai was cut off north of the camp, at the siege engine park.

Seven more engineers were bottled up with him; being the senior there, he had to assume command. Not being an expert on either

strategy or tactics, he saw just one thing clearly: in a few minutes all the abandoned machinery would be captured, so the only thing left was to destroy it. The Troll established order in his company with an iron hand (one of the seven who blurted something like “run for your lives!” remained lying senseless by a bunch of assault ladders) and ascertained that at least they had enough naphtha, the One be praised.

In a minute his subordinates rushed all around like ants, pouring it over the catapults and the bases of siege towers, while he hurried to the ‘gates’—the break in the ring of wagons surrounding the park—and ran smack into a forward troop of Rohirrim.

The mounted warriors treated the suddenly appearing lonely Mordorian without due respect, and paid for it. Kumai was strong even by Trollish standards (once at a student party he had walked a window ledge with dead-drunk Haladdin slumped in an armchair held in his outstretched arms), so his weapon of choice right then was a large wagon shaft that came to hand. Only one of the four riders managed to back off in time; the rest fell where they met that monstrous spinner.

Even so the Rohirrim were not discouraged much. Six more riders materialized out of the deepening gloom and formed a semi-circle bristling with spears. Kumai first tried to block the way with one of the wagons, turning it by the rear axle, but saw that he would not be in time. Stepping back a little and keeping the enemies in sight, he called over his shoulder:

“Fire it, by damn!”

“We’re not done, sir!” someone responded from behind, “the large catapults are still dry!”

“Fire what you can! The Westerners are here already!” he roared, and then addressed the battle-ready Rohirrim in Common: “Hey, who’s not a coward? Who’ll meet the mountain Troll in honest battle?”

It worked! The rank broke, and a few seconds later a dismounted officer wearing the white plumage of a cornet stood before him: “Are you ready, fair sir?” Kumai grabbed the pole by the middle, made a quick forward lunge—and found the Rohani less than two yards away; the only thing that saved the Troll was that the light Rohan blade could not cut through the pole which took the brunt of the blow. The engineer hastily backed inside the park, trying to gain precious seconds, but was unable to break away: the cornet was fleet as a ferret, and Kumai’s chances with his clumsy weapon were about zero

in close quarters. “Fire and run like hell!” he yelled, seeing clearly that he was finished. Indeed, the next moment the world exploded in a white flash of blinding pain and instantly faded into comforting dark. The cornet’s blow split his helmet clean apart, so he never saw how the very next second everything around turned into a sea of flames—his people did manage to finish the job . . . A few seconds later the Rohirrim, backing away from the heat, saw their reckless officer trudging from the depths of that roaring furnace, bent under the weight of the unconscious Troll. “What the hell, cornet?” “I must know the name of this fair sir! He’s a captive of my spear, after all . . .”

Kumai came to only three days later in a Rohani hospital tent, lying side by side with the three riders he felled; the steppe warriors made no distinction between the wounded and treated them all equally. Unfortunately, in this case it meant ‘equally bad:’ the engineer’s head was in bad shape, but the only medicine he got during that time was a flagon of wine brought by Cornet Jorgen who had captured him. The cornet voiced hope that once the Engineer Second Class was healed he would honor him with another fight, preferably with a weapon more traditional than a pole. Certainly he can be free within the confines of the camp, on his word as an officer . . . However, a week later the Rohirrim left on the Mordorian campaign, to win the crown of the Reunited Kingdom for Aragorn, and that same day Kumai and all the other wounded were sent to the Mindolluin quarry. Gondor was already a civilized country, unlike the backward Rohan . . .

How he managed to survive those first hellish days, with a busted head and a concussion that kept sending him into pits of unconsciousness was a total enigma; most likely it was simply Trollish stubbornness, to spite the warders. All the same, Kumai had no illusions regarding his fate. In his time, as required by the tradition of well-off Trollish families, Kumai had followed the entire career path of a worker in his father’s mines at Tzagan-Tzab, from miner to surveyor’s assistant. He knew enough about mining to understand that no one was concerned with economics here; they were sent to Mindolluin to die, rather than earn the quarry owners some profit. The daily food-to-production-quota ratio for Mordorian prisoners was such as to be bald-faced ‘killing on an installment plan.’

By the third week, when some prisoners were already dead and the others managed to more or less adapt to this murderous cadence (what else could they do?), an Elvish inspection team swooped in.

What shame, what barbarity! those folks carried on. Isn't it obvious that these people are capable of a lot more than driving wheelbarrows? There are plenty of experts in all kinds of trades here—take them and use them properly, damn it! The Gondorian bosses scratched their heads abashedly: "our bad, your eminences!" and instantly conducted a skill survey. As a result, a few dozen lucky ones traded the hell of Mindolluin for work in their chosen fields, leaving the quarry forever.

Whatever, the One be their judge . . . As for himself, Kumai did not think it proper to buy his life by building heavier-than-air aircraft for the enemy (that being his trade): some things are not to be done because they must not be done, period. An escape from Mindolluin was obviously a pipe dream, and he saw no other ways to get out of here. In the meantime, undernourishment was doing its work—he became more and more apathetic. It is hard to say how long he would have lasted in this mode—maybe a week, maybe even six months (but almost certainly not a year)—were it not for Mbanga, the One rest his soul, who managed to slam the door on his way out so spectacularly as to also solve all of Kumai's problems once and for all.

CHAPTER 35

Close to evening a stranger visited the Mordorians' barrack where the Engineer Second Class was being wracked by a consuming fever. He was wiry and quick in his movements, his swarthy Southerner's face marked by decisiveness—most likely an officer off an Umbarian privateer who by a quirk of fate wound up at Mindolluin rather than dangling off the yardarm of a royal galley. He stood for a minute over the bloody mess already presided over by hordes of fat flies and grumbled to no one in particular: "Yeah, prob'ly a goner by morning . . ." Then he disappeared, only to re-appear a half an hour later and, much to the surprise of Kumai's fellow inmates, begin treating him. Ordering them to hold the patient down, he started rubbing a yellowish ointment smelling sharply of camphor right into the bleeding welts; the pain was enough to jerk Kumai back from wobbly unconsciousness, and had he not been so weakened, his fellows would not have been able to keep him pinned down. Pirate (as the prisoners took to calling him) kept working calmly, and just a few minutes later the wounded man relaxed, melting with copious sweat, and sank into a real sleep like a stone in a pond.

The ointment was truly miraculous: by morning the welts had not only closed but started itching like crazy—a sure sign of healing. Only a few inflamed, and the Pirate, who showed up before morning call, got to work on those. Kumai, mostly back to life by then, greeted his savior gloomily:

"I don't want to sound ungrateful, but surely you could've found a better use for your wonderful medicine. What use is saving the one who's going to die soon anyway?"

"Well, a man has to do stupid things from time to time, or stop being a man. Turn a bit . . . yes . . . Bear this, engineer, it'll be better soon . . . Oh yes, speaking about doing stupid things.

Forgive my curiosity, but why have you stayed to die in this quarry? You could have been sitting pretty in the King's labs in Minas

Tirith right now."

Kumai grunted: "It's the simple wisdom of prostitutes I've followed all my life: don't hustle while under a client . . ." and cut himself short when it suddenly occurred to him: how does this guy know about my trade when I've told no one about it and have concealed it during that 'skill survey?'

"A commendable stance," nodded Pirate without a shadow of a smile. "The most interesting thing is that in our case it's also the most pragmatically correct one; actually, the only correct one. You see, all those who have *hustled* back then are already dead, whereas you will soon be free, with a bit of luck."

"Dead? How do you know?"

"I buried them myself, that's how. I'm a gravedigger here, you see."

Kumai digested this in silence for some time. The most horrible thing was his first thought: good riddance! And then: my God, whom did I turn into here? He did not understand Pirate's next words right away:

"In other words, you made the right choice, *mechanic* Kumai. As you can see, the Motherland had not forgotten you and has set up a special operation to save you. I am one of the participants in this operation."

"How?" He was totally dumbfounded. "What Motherland?"

"What, do you have several?"

"You're crazy! Someone really is ready to sacrifice a bunch of people just to get me out of here?"

"We are following orders," Pirate answered drily, "and it is not our business to decide what is more important to Mordor: a spy network that took years to create or a certain Engineer Second Class."

"I'm sorry . . . By the way, somehow I haven't asked your name yet."

"You did right—you have no need to know it. Your escape will begin in a few minutes, and no matter what happens, we'll never meet again."

"In a few minutes?! Listen, I'm a lot better now, but hardly enough to . . . how am I supposed to get past the outer guard?"

"As a corpse, of course. Remember that I serve on the burial detail. Don't worry, you're neither the first nor the last."

"So all those who were . . ."

"Alas, that job was for real. That was Elvish work, there was nothing we could do . . .

Anyway: you will now drink from this bottle and ‘die,’ to all appearances, for about twelve hours; after what happened to you yesterday, no one will be the wiser. The rest is technical details that do not concern you.”

“What do you mean, don’t concern me?”

“Very simple. I advise you to supplement your wonderful ‘don’t hustle when under the client’ principle with another one: ‘the less you know, the better you sleep.’ Whatever you need to know you will know when it’s time. Drink, Kumai, time is of the essence.”

The liquid in the bottle worked in seconds; the last thing he saw was Pirate’s swarthy face with a myriad of tiny scars around the lips.

. . . Kumai never found out what happened later to his ‘corpse’ (six beats per minute pulse, no visible reactions). Nor was there any reason for him to learn how he rode the corpse cart under a pile of dead bodies, or how he lay in the nearby abandoned quarry under a layer of gravel, awaiting transport. He came to in total darkness; everything’s in order—if Pirate was right about the twelve hours, it should be night now. Where am I? A stable, to judge by the smell . . . The moment he moved, an unfamiliar voice with a hard-to-place accent spoke:

“Congratulations on your safe arrival, Engineer Second Class! You can relax—the road ahead is long, but the biggest danger is past.”

“Thank you, ah . . .”

“Superintendant. Just Superintendant.”

“Thank you, Superintendant. That man, back in the quarry . . .”

“He’s all right. You don’t need to know more.”

“Can I send him my regards?”

“I doubt it. But I’ll report your request.”

“Permission to ask a question?”

“Permission granted.”

“Am I expected to create new weaponry?”

“Certainly.”

“But my specialty is completely different!”

“Do you intend to teach your superiors, Engineer Second Class?”

“No, sir.” He hesitated. “I’m just not sure . . .”

“But the HQ is sure.” The Superintendant’s voice thawed a little. “After all, you won’t be working alone. There’s a whole group there. Jageddin is the boss.”

“*The* Jageddin?!”

“The very same.”

“Not bad . . .”

Say what you want—but there is a certain charm in not having to think about much and just doing what you’re told . . .

“So, you just lie there and get better. Were it not for this stupid incident with the overseers, you could’ve gotten started right now, but as it is, we’ll have to wait.”

“You know, I’m well enough to go home, to Mordor, as it is.”

The invisible man chuckled: “Why do you think you’re going to Mordor?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s very simple, really. You’re a wanted man, or at least we’re anticipating such an eventuality; as you’ve seen, the Elves are very thorough. Whereas you must work, rather than hide—two very different tasks.”

“All right; where, then?”

“Think. What’s the best place to stash stolen goods? In a policeman’s attic. What’s the darkest spot? Right under the lamp. Get it?”

“You mean to say . . .” Kumai said slowly; he felt cold in his gut, because all the pieces of the wonderful puzzle that was his miraculous escape began to fit into a very different picture: a clever ruse. “You mean to say that I’m staying here, in Gondor?”

“No. To be honest, it would be tempting to hide you in Gondor, nor would it be too difficult in any other time. We were working on this option, but had to abandon it. The thing is, right now the King and the Queen are jockeying for position in Minas Tirith; both have their own secret services which spy on each other, so it would be real easy to attract their attention purely by accident. So, unfortunately, no local option for us. But the world is not limited to Gondor and Mordor . . . By the way, were it the Reunited Kingdom trying to use you, they would most likely have sent you to Mordor: between them, the army and the counter-intelligence service of the victorious nation could have set up an ‘ivory tower’ for you bar none. Do you agree?”

Silence fell for a couple of seconds.

“Damn! Is it so obvious on my face?”

“Without a doubt—although I can’t see your face in this dark. In other words, let the experts worry about such things and do the job you know how to do, all right?”

“Please accept my apologies, Superintendant.”

“Don’t worry about it. As long as we’re on the subject: the people

you'll be working with at that 'university' got there in a variety of ways; many are your good friends. You can discuss anything your heart desires with them—student parties, news of the Resistance, philosophy—anything but the story of how you got there. Loose talk on the subject can cost a lot of people their lives—both my colleagues, like our mutual friend in Mindolluin, and your colleagues still in the hands of the enemy. I say this with utmost seriousness and responsibility. Do you understand, Engineer Second Class?"

"Yes, Superintendant."

"Very good. Get well soon and move on."

"Congratulations, Mongoose." Cheetah straightened up in his armchair and looked over the Secret Guard lieutenant standing there at attention. "I have examined your report on Operation Mockingbird. Six men rescued—great job. The Service thanks you."

"His Majesty's servant, sir!"

"At ease, Lieutenant. Sit down, this is no parade ground. So the retreat from Mindolluin happened under the emergency option?"

"Yes, sir. The last man I've watched—engineer Kumai, number thirty-six on our list—got into a stupid mess the day before the planned escape. The local warders turned him into chopped liver, and I had to fix him up real fast; to be honest, first I thought that there was no hope. I did save and extract him, but this completely exposed me: the snitches reported the healing, and . . . In other words, your boys from the backup team showed up just in time."

"Yeah," Cheetah grumbled and looked at the shabby walls of the safe house with visible disgust, "quite in time . . . Two dead bodies, three wounded, Her Majesty's entire Secret Service is frantically looking for a Mordorian spy: a swarthy man with small scars around the mouth. Meanwhile, the police is looking for an escaped convict of the same description . . . I think, lieutenant, that it's high time you changed climates; get packing to go South, to work in Umbar."

"Yes, Captain, sir!"

"Here, examine this dossier. Baron Tangorn, Faramir's Umbarian resident before the war.

We have reasons to believe that he is doing the same thing we are doing—looking for Mordorian experts and documents for his prince; there are indications that soon he'll show up in Umbar. Your task is to capture Tangorn and get all the information concerning this

Ithilienian venture out of him. His Majesty considers this operation to be of exceptional importance."

"May I treat him harshly to get the information?"

"It won't work in any other way; judging by this dossier, the baron is not the kind to buy his life with the secrets he's been trusted with. In any case he'll have to be disposed of after the interrogation, since we're formally allied with Ithilien, so this whole story must not become known."

"How will he come to Umbar—in an official capacity or?.."

"Most likely 'or.' You have an important advantage: it appears that Tangorn doesn't know that he's being hunted. He may even stay openly in a local hotel, at least at first, and then his capture will not be a problem. But the baron is an old hand; if he detects something amiss, he'll disappear in that city like a frog in a pond."

"Understood. Will I operate independently, alone?"

"Independently, but not alone. You'll have three sergeants—choose them yourself, out of our people. If you find him quick, that should be more than enough. But if you spook him . . ."

"That can't happen, Captain, sir!"

"Anything can happen to anyone," Cheetah responded in annoyance, involuntarily glancing at his foot. "Anyway, while searching in the city you may not ask the local station for help, which is a great pity: they have a lot of manpower, and, more importantly, excellent contacts in the local police . . ."

"May I know why?"

"Because we have information that the Elves are very active in Umbar and there's a strong pro-Elvish underground there. Under no circumstances may Lórien find out about your operation—this is the strictest order—and I'm concerned with leaks: our people are in the shortest supply, and all the resident spies in Umbar are regular people . . ." Cheetah hesitated a little and finished in a humdrum sort of tone: "You will have a G-mandate, just in case."

Mongoose looked up at the captain, as if to confirm what he heard. So this is what 'His Majesty considers this operation to be of exceptional importance' means. A G-mandate allows a member of the Secret Service to act in the name of the King. In overseas operations this can be necessary for only two reasons: to give a direct order to the ambassador or to depose (or eliminate on the spot) the local chief of station . . .

PART III

The Umbarian Gambit

He was a self-made counter-terrorist, "part soldier, part copper, part villain,"[50]
as he liked to say, and he belonged to the fabled generation of his trade.
He had hunted Communists in Malaya and Mau Mau in Kenya,
Jews in Palestine, Arabs in Aden, and the Irish everywhere.
John LeCarré

CHAPTER 36

Umbar, the Fish Market

June 2, 3019

The shrimp were excellent. They sat on the tin plate like battle-ready triremes on the dim morning surface of the Barangar Bay: spiky rostrums[51] in the tangle of rigging (feelers) threatening the enemy, oars (feet) hugging the body, just like they should in preparation for boarding. Half a dozen per portion—can't really handle any more of these genuinely 'royal' shrimp that barely fit in the palm; besides, the tangy juice that gave such a charm to the sweetish pink flesh was biting his out-of-practice lips and fingertips. Tangorn glanced at the awaiting tray with large coal-fried oysters: heat had split the large mossy stones a bit along the seam, shyly showing their swarthy contents; the effect was charmingly obscene. Say what you want, but nowhere in the world can they prepare seafood like they can in the small taverns around the Fish Market, not even at the fashionable restaurants on the Three Stars Embankment! Pity the sea slugs are not in season . . . He sighed and tackled another piquant juicy shrimp, listening absent-mindedly to his companion's chatter.

". . . surely you can agree, Baron: your countries are just a tiny peninsula on the far northwest of Arda that's way overestimating its importance. Moreover, it's inhabited by paranoiacs who have convinced themselves that the rest of the world can think of nothing else but how to conquer and enslave them. Please! Who the hell needs your sickly toadstool-studded copses, your snows that don't melt for half a year, or that foamy brown sourwater that you drink instead of wine?"

Not that this dope's elocutions insulted Tangorn's patriotic

sentiments (especially since most of what he said was true), but such statements sounded very strange coming from a high-placed official of the Foreign Ministry of the Umbar Republic; particularly so considering that their meeting was the official's idea. The baron was not very surprised when this morning the appropriately obsequious proprietor of the Lucky Anchor hotel where he was staying has handed him an envelope plastered all over with assorted state seals. Well, it has been three days since he had showed up in Umbar, where he had acquired—how shall we put it?—an ambiguous but indisputably colorful reputation; it was quite natural for the Assistant State Secretary Gagano (at the urging of Alkabir, chief of the Northern Countries section) to request a confidential meeting with the guest from Ithilien. As a result, Tangorn has been 'considering' this idiot's rude diatribes for a good quarter of an hour . . . Stop! he told himself; is he really such an idiot as he pretends to be? Let's feel him out . . . try something innocuous.

"Well, 'a tiny peninsula that's way overestimating its importance'—that's pretty well said," the baron acknowledged good-naturedly, "but I have to take issue with the last point of your indictment, regarding 'brown sourwater.' Believe it or not, not half a minute ago I was thinking about how nice it'd be to pair a couple of pints of our good old bitter with these shrimp! One that's black and sour like pitch, with foam thick enough to hold up a small coin . . ." He smiled dreamily and gestured at the other man with tired condescension.

"Mister Assistant State Secretary, you simply can't imagine a real Gondorian bitter. The first, longest swallow leaves a vanishing aftertaste of smoke on your tongue, like what you can smell in a park when they burn last year's leaves in the spring; not for naught is it called smoked beer . . ."[52]

Mister Assistant State Secretary responded to the effect that he knew his beers no worse than the natives, having worked in the Northern Countries division for many years; he was likewise conversant with all kinds of seal blubber so prized by the *lossoths* inhabiting the banks of the Bay of Forochel. Yeah . . . many years in the Northern Countries division, right.

It's no crime to deeply despise foreigners, but why demonstrate these feelings to them so brazenly? And as for the fact that the archaically top-fermented bitters and stouts have not been brewed outside of Eriador for the last hundred years, and that the famous smoked beer is not even a bitter, but a lager with specially

caramelized hops—no, a specialist has no right not to know such things about a country he's supposed to work with! Say what you want, but the exceedingly smart and cautious Alkabir has strange employees these days.

So why did they want to meet him? First guess: to get him out of his hotel room in order to check his luggage for messages, letters of introductions, and such. Well, such cheap tricks would be in style for the dumb boy scouts from the Gondorian station, but the Umbarian Secret Service, as far as he could remember, worked in much subtler ways. Second guess: Alkabir is letting him know on behalf of the Foreign Ministry that the Republic has abandoned its age-old practice of temporary alliances balancing opposing forces, and has decided to surrender to the strongest—that'd be Gondor—therefore it is pointedly refusing meaningful contact with the Ithilien emissary (undoubtedly that's who they think he is).

Third guess, the most likely one: Alkabir is letting him know that while the Republic had indeed abandoned the said age-old practice, there are powerful forces that disagree with this decision, and the 'Ithilien emissary' should deal with them, rather than with the Foreign Ministry and other official channels, which the pompous ass Gagano is supposed to personify. The main thing is that regardless of which of these guesses is correct, it's not the right time to go to the Blue Palace waving his diplomatic papers (had he actually had any).

Here Tangorn had to laugh: so I don't believe that Alkabir sent Gagano without his choice being a hidden message, while Alkabir doesn't believe that I'm really retired and not Faramir's fully empowered representative, however unofficial. Both of these pictures, though resting as they do on fairly tenuous assumptions, are internally consistent, so it's not entirely clear which facts might convince either one of us otherwise . . .

"What's so funny, Baron?" the Assistant State Secretary inquired haughtily.

"Nothing much, just an amusing thought . . . Anyway, we've gone on talking for a bit too long, you're probably expected back at the office. A simple traveler such as myself shouldn't distract such an important person for so long. Thank you so much for the edifying conversation. And, if it's not too much trouble, please convey the following to dearest Alkabir—literally, please, with nothing added—I have fully appreciated his decision to appoint specifically Assistant State Secretary Gagano to conduct talks with me, but I'm afraid that

the guys at 12 Shore Street are too simple-minded to appreciate such subtleties . . .”

Tangorn cut himself off because at the mention of the Gondorian embassy his interlocutor glanced around furtively (as if expecting to find a couple of His Majesty’s Secret Guards in full parade black uniforms at the nearest table, their torture instruments arranged right there on the tablecloth) and dashed for the exit, mumbling excuses. A solitary merchant-looking gentleman thoughtfully consuming sea urchin eggs at a nearby table looked up at the baron, his face an appropriate mixture of confusion, uncertainty, and fear. Tangorn smiled back, pointed at the receding State Secretary and quite sincerely shrugged and sadly twirled a finger next to his temple. Then he pulled the cooling oyster plate close (why waste good food?), expertly pulled the mollusk from its apparently impregnable fortress, and lost himself in thought.

The grand building on Shore Street that now housed the Reunited Kingdom’s embassy (although it would have been more appropriate to label it the Umbar branch of the Secret Guard) deservedly had the most ominous reputation among the citizenry. Minas Tirith considered the imminent annexation of Umbar a done deal, calling it nothing but ‘a pirate haven on the ancestral lands of South Gondor.’ The ambassador was readying himself to become the governor without much ado, while the people of the spy station already behaved like they owned the place. They called themselves ‘spies’ although in reality they were nothing but a band of thugs; looking at them, Tangorn felt like a noble bandit of the classic school next to a gang of underage punks. People disappearing and torture-disfigured corpses surfacing in the canals were now commonplace; until recently the Umbarians could console themselves that the victims were mostly Mordorian immigrants, but a recent attempt on the famous Admiral Carnero dispelled those illusions.

In other words, Aragorn’s embassy was a formidable institution, no doubt about that, but that its mere mention would so scare a high-ranking official during performance of his duties . . . no, something’s off here. Unless . . . unless this dude works for the Gondorians!

Aha! So he thought that I’ve figured him out and would turn him in. Man, that was a propitious joke, pure fool’s luck! But Aragorn’s men’s nerves are in bad shape for some reason. I wonder where I could actually turn in a traitor in this city, where the police is either solidly bought or else scared spitless, while the Gondorian embassy

could issue direct orders to administration officials if it so wished? Of course, there's also the local secret service and the military, but amazingly those, too, are behaving as if nothing going on has anything to do with them . . . Whatever, to hell with this Gagano, I have quite a few of my own problems now! That my modest person is now of interest to the Gondorian spies is bad enough.

What the devil! he thought, sipping suddenly tasteless wine. Why do they all think that I'm here with the mandate of an ambassador plenipotentiary of the Princedom of Ithilien sewn into my pants, and an offer of a defense treaty? All right, suppose that my *countrymen* are merely giving me a gentle warning not to contact the Republic's authorities officially. I'm willing to abide by this warning religiously, seeing as how it doesn't impede my actual plans. Damn, wouldn't it be lovely to let them all know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth: guys, I really am not interested in getting involved in the Gondor-Umbar mess! I have a totally different job: to establish real contact with the Elvish clandestine structures here in under three weeks, knowing nothing but a single name we got from Eloar's letter —Elandar . . .

Tangorn finished his wine, tossed his last Umbarian silver coin with Castamir's haughty profile on the table (Sharya-Rana gave them the locations of several secret money caches, but he avoided paying with golden dungans of Mordor) and headed for the exit, limping slightly. The sea urchin connoisseur at the nearby table has also finished his meal and unhurriedly wiped first his fingers and then his lips (thin and slightly puckered with a multitude of tiny scars around them) with a handkerchief—*attention*! Three sailors were concentrating on their clam chowder at the table right next to the door; one of them casually moved an open bottle of Barangar red to the edge of the table —*ready*! Tangorn would reach the tavern door in six or seven seconds, which was all the time that lieutenant Mongoose of the Secret Guard had to decide whether to improvise and capture the baron right now or stick to the original carefully worked out plan. Who would have thought that his agent Gagano would blow it so stupidly?

All he had to do was hint to Tangorn in the name of the Foreign Ministry that his official accreditation would be untimely (the lieutenant had absolutely no desire to abduct a diplomat of a foreign and nominally allied state); the assistant state secretary managed that quite well. Unfortunately, he was cowardly (even his recruitment was accomplished with blackmail over really trivial matters), so

Mongoose's demand that he keep this assignment secret from his case officer at the station plunged the Umbarian into utter dread. He knew very well that at 12 Shore Street they would judge such 'forgetfulness' as double-dealing, with all proper consequences. Gagano shuddered with fear at the mere thought of either of his Gondorian masters, and so fell apart after Tangorn's shot in the dark.

No, Mongoose said to himself, don't jump at it. Nothing terrible has happened yet. Yes, the baron had surely figured out that his interlocutor is connected to Gondorian spies, but most likely he will interpret that as Minas Tirith's desire to curtail Emyn Arnen's diplomatic activity . . . All right, we'll let him go and stick to the original plan. The lieutenant put the handkerchief back in his pocket —rather than dropping it on the table—and Tangorn went by the sailors at the door without a hindrance. He mixed with the street crowds and unhurriedly headed to the waterfront; he checked for surveillance twice but saw none.

Indeed, there was none: Mongoose took the sane view that right then it was most important not to spook their quarry. In just a few hours they will be fully ready for the operation, when they receive two genuine Umbar police uniforms. This very evening a police detail will visit the Lucky Anchor hotel, present a properly executed warrant and ask him to come to the local station to testify . . . and they will not let the baron die before he tells them everything he knows about the Ithilienian intelligence service's accomplishments in the hunt for Mordorian technology.

CHAPTER 37

Probably no one will ever know when people started settling on this long mountainous peninsula and the flat swampy islands of the bay it encloses. In any event, while the inhabitants of the Reunited Kingdom do not utter the word 'Númenor' without a reverential sigh, a gaze at the sky, and an upraised index finger, the Umbarians sincerely scratch their heads: "Númenorians? Man, who can remember all those barbarians! Have you any idea how many of them we've seen here?" Two circumstances have determined Umbar's fate as a great sea power: an excellent enclosed harbor and the fact that the highest point on the peninsula is 5,356 feet above sea level; these are the only real mountains on the entire coast south of Anduin. In these arid latitudes 'mountains' spell 'forests,' 'forests' spell 'ships,' and 'ships' spell 'sea trade,' which organically blends with privateering and—let's be honest—plain piracy. Add to that a fantastically advantageous location in the middle of everything: it is a true World's crossroads, an ideal transit point for trade, and the terminus of the caravan routes from the Eastern countries.

A solid line of defensive works on the Chevelgar isthmus joining the peninsula to the mainland plus a superior navy to guard against enemy landings made Umbar unassailable, which makes its being constantly conquered by all and sundry very puzzling. To be more precise, every time an attack loomed the Umbarians averted action by acknowledging the sovereignty of whatever continental power it was and paying tribute, quite sanely figuring that a war, even a victorious one, would cost their trade republic a lot more in all respects.

Their attitude can be likened to that of a businessman who pays 'protection money' to a racketeer, with neither pleasure nor undue upset, building this expense into his prices; he cares nota whit which criminal cartel his 'partners' belong to, but only that they do not stage gunfights next to his store.

On the mainland long sieges followed awesome battles; storied

kings (ever concerned with winning new lands rather than wisely governing those they already had) were tempted time and again to order their finance ministers beheaded for daring to interrupt the grandiose flights of royal fancy with their pedestrian: “The treasury is empty, sire, and the army hasn’t been paid since last September!”—in other words, life went on. In the meantime, behind the Chevelgar fortifications the Umbarians kept beautifying their swampy islands, joining them with dams and bridges and splitting them with canals. The mega polis that rose from the azure waters of the lagoon was rightly considered the most beautiful city in all Middle Earth: its merchants and bankers swam in money, so for four centuries and counting the best architects and sculptors have labored here dawn to dusk.

In the last three hundred years or so Umbar got powerful enough to eschew paying tribute to anyone. An absolute sea power, it turned instead to a tactic of temporary defensive alliances—now with Mordor against Gondor, then with Gondor against Mordor, then again with Khand against both of the above. Last year, though, the situation changed drastically: Mordor sank into oblivion (not without Umbar helping by supplying Aragorn with a landing fleet at the crucial moment, so as to get rid of a caravan trade competitor for good)[53], Khand was being torn apart by a religious civil war and had no influence in the seashore regions, while a new threat arose in the South, one with which there was no negotiation—the Haradrim. As a result, the Republic faced a Hobson’s choice between southern savages and northern barbarians. The Senate chose the latter, hoping to hide from the Haradi invasion behind Aragorn’s swords, although it was crystal clear that this time the protection price would be direct occupation of the tiny country by its ‘great northern neighbor.’ No few citizens were of the opinion that Umbarian independence and civil liberties were quite worthy of defending with their lives.

Most denizens of the city, though, never dwelled on these sad matters, or at least tried hard not to. Happy cosmopolitan Umbar with its gauche and intimately corrupt authorities led its usual life of the World’s Crossroads. It had active temples of all three major and scores of minor religions, while a merchant from anywhere could celebrate a deal in a restaurant of his national cuisine. Here, information was gathered, traded, and stolen by diplomats and spies from countries no one in the Reunited Kingdom had ever heard of, and who in their turn cared nothing for the snowy outback beyond the Anduin. Here one

could find any merchandise ever produced by the Arda's soil, water, or mines, or created by the minds and hands of its inhabitants: from exotic fruits to rarest medicines and drugs, from a magnificent platinum tiara encrusted with famous Vendotenian emeralds to a Mordorian scimitar that can split stone and then be wrapped around your waist like a belt, from oversized fossilized teeth (supposedly dragon's and magical) to manuscripts in dead languages. (Consider the popular joke: "Does the Ring of Power really exist? No, else it could have been bought in an Umbar market.") And how did blood mix here, what fantastic beauties surfaced regularly from this universal melting pot! In any case, on his way from the Fish Market to the Three Stars Embankment Tangorn had counted at least half a dozen such irresistible lovelies.

He stopped by a familiar dugout bar to drink some of his favorite Golden Muscat. Its sweetness and tartness balance each other so perfectly that the taste seems to disappear altogether and the wine turns into materialized aroma, seemingly simple and even somewhat crude, but in reality weaved from a multitude of shades—multiple meanings and hints. Let some of it linger on your tongue, and you will see the topaz berries warm with the afternoon sun, slightly sprinkled with limestone dust, and the blindingly white path through the vineyard, and then the enthralling Umbarian six-line verses—*takatos*—will begin creating themselves right out of the noon haze . . .

It's strange, really, he thought while climbing up the stairs back into the street (another check—still no tail), it's strange but he used to believe that fully appreciating the taste of this magic drink would lead him to a full understanding of the soul of the city where it was born. Umbar—the wonderful, damned, tender, fickle, mocking, depraved, ever avoiding real intimacy Umbar . . . A bitch of unbelievable beauty and charm who gave you a love potion to drink, precisely so she could then openly flirt with all and sundry in your full view, leaving you the choice of either killing her or accepting her as she was. He chose the latter, and now, back after a four-year absence, knew with certainty: baron Tangorn's Gondorian phase was nothing but a prolonged misunderstanding, for his real home is here . . .

He stopped by the parapet, leaned on the warm pinkish limestone, swept his gaze over the majestic view of both of Umbar's bays—Kharmian and Barangar—and suddenly realized: this was the very place where he met baron Grager on his first day in Umbar! The resident listened to Tangorn's introduction and said coldly: "I don't

care for Faramir's recommendations! Young man, I won't give you any real work for at least six months. By then you must know the city better than the police, speak both local languages without an accent, and have acquaintances in all strata of society—from criminals to senators. That's just for starters. If you fail, you can go home and do literary translations, you're pretty good at it." Truly everything comes around . . .

Did he manage to become a local? That doesn't seem possible . . . Be that as it may, he learned to write *takatos* well appreciated by connoisseurs, to understand ship's rigging, and to easily converse with Kharmian smugglers in their gaudy *patois*. Even now he can guide a gondola through the maze of Old City canals with his eyes closed; he still remembers a dozen open-ended courtyards and other such places where one can lose a tail even when openly tracked by a large team . . . He had weaved a pretty decent agent network here, and then he had Alviss—this city held no secrets from her . . . Or, perhaps, she had him?

Alviss was the most glamorous of the Umbar courtesans. From her Belfalas mother who kept a humble port brothel called The Siren's Kiss she had inherited sapphire eyes and hair the color of light copper that instantly drove any Southerner crazy; from her father—a corsair skipper who wound up on a yardarm when the girl was barely a year old—a man's mind, an independent character, and a penchant for well-considered gambles. This combination of qualities enabled her to rise from the port hovels of her birth to her own mansion on Jasper Street, where the cream of the Republic's elite gathered. Alviss' outfits regularly caused major indigestion in wives and official mistresses of high officials, and her body was the model for three large canvasses and the cause of a dozen duels. A night with her cost either a fortune or nothing but a trifle like a well-dedicated poem.

That was precisely how it happened with Tangorn, who dropped by her salon once (he had to establish contact with the secretary of the Khand embassy, who was a regular). When the guests started to leave, the beauty confronted the funny northern barbarian and said with indignation belied by sparkles of laughter in her eyes:

"Rumor has it, Baron, that you claimed my hair is dyed!" Tangorn opened his mouth to deny this monstrous lie, but realized immediately that this was not what was expected of him. "I assure you that I'm a natural blond. Would you like to confirm that?"

"What, right now?"

“Sure, when else?” Taking his arm, she marched from the living room to the inner chambers, purring: “Let’s find out if you’re as good in bed as on the dance floor . . .”

It turned out that he was even better. By morning Alviss had signed an unconditional surrender pact to which she stuck quite well over the years that followed. As for Tangorn, at first it seemed nothing more than an exciting adventure to him; the baron realized that this woman had stealthily taken up more of his heart than he could afford only when she bestowed her characteristically generous attentions on Senator Loano’s young son—an empty-headed pretty boy fond of writing sickeningly sweet verses. The duel that followed made the whole city laugh (the baron inflicted blows with the flat of his sword, using it as a club, so the youngster got away with only a set of mighty bruises and a concussion), made Grager furious, and totally confused the Umbarian secret service: a spy has no right to behave thusly! Tangorn took the drubbing from the chief indifferently and asked only to be reassigned away from Umbar—to Khand, say.

Somehow he had no consistent memories of the year he spent in Khand: only the sun-bleached adobe walls, windowless like the forever veiled faces of the local women; the smell of overheated cotton oil, the taste of bland flatbreads (the moment they cool they resemble mortar in both taste and texture), and the incessant whine of the *zurna* over it all, like the maddening buzz of a giant mosquito. The baron tried forgetting Alviss by losing himself in work—he found out that the syrupy caresses of the local beauties could not do that. Strangely, he did not connect Grager’s sudden order to return to Umbar to his reports.

However, it turned out that one of the ideas he mentioned in passing (analyzing the real trade volume between Mordor and the other countries beyond Anduin) had seemed so fruitful to Grager that the latter decided to pursue it himself right there, in Khand. To Tangorn’s total amazement Grager appointed him chief of station in Umbar: “Sorry, but there’s no one better; besides, you know the Southern saying: to learn to swim, you gotta swim.”

The very next day a woman wearing an opaque Khand burka found him, gracefully turned up the veil and said with a shy smile that astounded him: “Hello, Tan . . . You’ll laugh, but I’ve waited for you all this time. I’ll wait more if I have to.”

“Really? You must’ve devoted yourself to serving Valya-Vekte,” he scoffed, trying desperately to surface from those damn sapphire

depths.

"Valya-Vekte?"

"If I'm not mistaken, she's the goddess of virginity in the Aritanian pantheon. The Aritanian temple is only three blocks from your house, so this service won't be too burdensome . . ."

"That's not what I mean," Alviss shrugged. "Sure, I've slept with a bunch of people this past year, but that was just work, nothing else." Then she looked straight at him and fired a broadside: "But you know, Tan, you shouldn't have any illusions that the so-called decent folks would think your work any less shameful than mine—I mean your real work here."

He digested this silently for some time, and then found strength to laugh: "Yeah, you got me to rights, Aly!" With those words he put his hands on her waist, as if about to spin her in a dance: "And let them all go to hell!"

She smiled sadly: "I've got nothing to do with it; nor have you . . . It's just that we're sentenced to each other, and there's nothing to be done about it."

It was God's honest truth. They parted numerous times, sometimes for a long time, but then always started from the same place. She greeted him differently on his return: sometimes one look of hers chilled the room with an inch of hoarfrost; sometimes it seemed that Arda split to its very hidden core and an blazing protuberance of the Eternal Fire sprang forth; sometimes she simply stroked his cheek with a sigh: "Come in. You look thin; want to eat something?"—a model housewife meeting her husband after a routine business trip. Both of them understood with absolute clarity that each of them carried a lethal dose of poison in their veins, and only the other had an antidote, a temporary one at that.

CHAPTER 38

Of course, Tangorn's life in Umbar was not limited to travails of love. It should be noted that the baron's professional responsibilities left a certain imprint on his relationship with Alviss. Since she let him know that she was aware of the true nature of his business, at first the baron thought that his girlfriend was somehow connected to the Umbarian secret service.

He learned otherwise in a fairly aggravating manner, when twice he planted on her some information meant for his 'colleagues,' and twice it got nowhere; the second time the mix-up almost cost him a well-designed operation.

"Aly, why do you think that your secret service has so little interest in me that they haven't even asked you to look after me?"

"Of course they asked me, right after you came back. And left empty-handed."

"You must have had trouble . . ."

"Nothing serious, Tan, forget about it, please!"

"Maybe you should've agreed, at least for show."

"No. I don't want to do it, not even for show. You see, to inform on a loved one, one has to be a highly moral individual with an ingrained sense of civic duty. But I'm just a whore who knows nothing of those things . . . Let's not talk about this anymore, all right?"

This discovery gave the baron the idea to use Alviss' boundless connections for his own data gathering—not of the secret kind (God forbid!), but public information. He and Grager were most interested not in the new generation of warships being built at the Republic's shipyards or the recipe of the 'Umbarian fire' (a mysterious flammable liquid used to great effect during sieges and sea battles)[54], but rather in such mundane matters as caravan trade volumes and price fluctuations on the food markets of Umbar and Barad-Dur. Another keen interest of the baron's were the technological advances that more and more defined the civilization of Mordor, which he had always

sincerely admired. Amazingly, it was Faramir's semi-amateurish team (whose members, it should be mentioned, were not in state service and received not a dime from the Gondorian treasury during all these years) that had intuitively arrived at the style that intelligence services have only widely adopted in our days. It is well known that these days it is not the swashbuckling secret agents toting micro-cameras and noise-suppressed pistols who obtain the most valuable intelligence information, but rather analysts diligently combing newspapers, stock market news, and other openly available sources.

While Tangorn, on Alviss' advice, perused the activities of Umbarian financiers (the magic of the White Council was a child's game in comparison), Grager became Algoran, merchant of the second guild, and founded a company in Khand to export olive oil to Mordor in exchange for products of high technology. The trading house Algoran & Co. prospered; with its hand always on the pulse of the local agricultural markets, the firm kept increasing its export share and even managed to corner the import of dates for a time. The head of the company avoided visiting his Barad-Dur branch (having no reasons to believe that Mordor's counterintelligence service was staffed with incompetent fools), but his position did not require that: the commander's place is not in the front ranks but on a nearby hill.

The result of all this activity was a twelve-page document that historians now call 'Grager's memorandum.' Putting together the rising profit margins of the caravan trade (as it was followed by the stock and commodity exchanges in Umbar and Barad-Dur), the introduction of a number of protectionist bills in the Mordorian parliament by the agrarian lobby (a reaction to the sharp increase of local growing costs), and a good dozen of other factors, Grager and Tangorn proved conclusively that import-reliant Mordor was incapable of waging prolonged war. Being totally dependent on caravan trade with its neighbors (a position totally incompatible with war), it was interested in peace and stability in the region above all else, and therefore posed no danger to Gondor. On the other hand, the safety of trade routes was a matter of life and death to Mordor, making it likely to react harshly and perhaps not too judiciously to any threat to these. The spies concluded: "Should anyone wish to force Mordor into a war, it would be very easy to accomplish by terrorizing caravans on the Ithilien Highway."

Faramir took these conclusions to a special session of the Royal Council in another of his attempts to prove, facts in hand, that the

much-belabored ‘Mordorian threat’ was nothing but a myth. The Council, as usual, listened respectfully, understood nothing, and ruled on the matter by addressing the prince with its by now familiar litany of reprimands and instructions. These boiled down to two points: “gentlemen don’t read each other’s mail”[55] and “your spies have gotten lazy and do no real work.” Thereafter Grager’s memorandum was sent to the archives, where it gathered dust with the Faramir’s intelligence service’s other reports until catching the eye of Gandalf during a visit to Minas Tirith . . .

When the war began exactly following their script, Tangorn realized with horror that it was all his doing.

“. . . ’The World is Text,’ eh, man—just the way you like it. What’s your problem?” Grager smirked woodenly, pouring yet another shot of either tequila or some other moonshine with an unsteady hand.

“But we wrote a different Text, you and I, totally different!”

“Whaddya mean—different? My dear aesthete, a text exists only in its interaction with a reader. Everyone writes their own story of Princess Allandale, and whatever Alrufin himself wanted to say is absolutely irrelevant. Looks like we managed to create a real work of art, since the readers,” the resident waved a finger near his ear, so it was impossible to say whether he meant the Royal Council or some really Higher Powers, “managed to read it in this rather unexpected way.”

“We betrayed them . . . We got played like little kids, but that’s no excuse—we betrayed them . . .” Tangorn repeated, staring fixedly into the murky opalescent depths of his glass.

“Yep—it’s no excuse . . . Another one?”

He could not figure out which day of their binge it was—not considering themselves in any service, they did not keep track. They started the day the head of the trading house Algoran & Co. heard of the war and raced to Umbar, running down several horses, and learned the details from him. Strangely, they more or less held up when apart, but now, looking each other in the eye, they recognized clearly and at once—this was the end of all they held dear, and they have destroyed it with their own hands. Two well-meaning idiots . . . Then there was the nightmarish nauseating hung-over dawn when he awoke because Grager poured a pitcher of ice-cold water over him. Grager looked his usual self, quick and sure-footed, so his bloodshot eyes and several days’ growth of beard seemed a part of some not too successful disguise.

“Up!” he informed drily. “We’re in business again. We’ve been summoned to Minas Tirith to brief the Royal Council on the possibilities of a separate peace with Mordor. Immediately and with utmost secrecy, of course . . . Hot damn, maybe we can still fix something! His Majesty Denethor is a practical ruler; looks like he, too, needs this war like a fish needs an umbrella.”

They have worked on their document for three days with almost no sleep or food, running on coffee alone, putting all their souls and all their expertise into it—they had no right to a second mistake. It was a true masterpiece: a meld of unassailable logic and inerrant intuition based on an intimate knowledge of the East, expressed in a brilliant literary language capable of touching every heart; it was the road to peace with an exhaustive description of the dangers and traps lining that road. On his way to the port Tangorn found a minute to drop in on Alviss: “I’m going to Gondor—only for a short while, so don’t feel lonely!”

She paled and said almost inaudibly: “You’re going to war, Tan. We’re separating for a long time, most likely forever . . . could you not say a proper good-bye, at least?”

“What’re you talking about, Aly?” he was sincerely puzzled. He hesitated for a couple of seconds then decided to breach security: “To be honest, I’m going there to stop this stupid war. In any case I hate it and I’m not about to play those games, by the halls of Valinor!”

“You’re going to war,” she repeated despondently, “I know that for sure. I’ll be praying for you . . . Please go now, don’t look at me when I’m like this.”

When their ship had passed the gloomy stormy shores of South Gondor and entered the Anduin, Grager muttered through clenched teeth: “Picture this: we show up in Minas Tirith and they stare at us: ‘Who are you guys? What Royal Council—are you crazy? It must be some joke, nobody called for you.”

But it was no joke. Indeed, they were impatiently expected right at the Pelargir pier: “Baron Grager? Baron Tangorn? You’re under arrest.”

Only their own could have taken the two best spies of the West so easily.

CHAPTER 39

"Now tell us, Baron, exactly how you sold the Motherland over there, in Umbar."

"Maybe I'd sell it, on sober reflection, but who the hell would buy such a motherland?"

"Let the record reflect: suspect Tangorn admits planning to switch to the enemy's side and didn't do it only because of circumstances beyond his control."

"Yeah, that's it: maybe he was planning something, but didn't manage to do anything. Put it down like that."

"Just the documents you brought are enough to have you drawn and quartered—all those 'overtures of peace'!"

"They were written at the direct order of the Royal Council."

"We've heard this fairy tale already. Can you show us this order?"

"Dammit, I must have calluses on my tongue already from telling you: it came under the G-mandate, and such documents are to be destroyed after reading!"

"Gentlemen, I do believe it's beneath us to plumb the customs of thieves and spies . . ."

This 'investigation' has been dragging on for two weeks already. Not that the spies' guilt or their impending sentence were in any doubt on either side; it was just that Gondor had the rule of law. This meant that an out-of-favor nobleman could not be simply sent to the gallows with only a flick of the royal wrist; proper formalities had to be observed. Most importantly, Tangorn never had a feeling that what was happening was unfair. That traitorous feeling had sometimes undone many brave and straight-thinking individuals, causing them to write useless and demeaning pleas to the authorities. The spies were about to be executed not in error or on a false report, but precisely for what they did do—for trying to stop a useless war their country did not need; everything was honest and above board and no one was to blame. So when Tangorn was roused from his cot one night ("Out,

with your possessions!"), he did not know what to think.

In the prison office he and Grager saw the Chief Warden of the Pelargir prison and Prince Faramir, dressed in the field fatigues of a regiment unknown to them. The Warden was glum and perplexed; clearly, he was being forced to make some very unpleasant decision.

"Can you read?" the prince was inquiring coldly.

"But your order . . ."

"Not mine—the Royal order!"

"Yes, sir, the Royal order! Well, it says here that you're forming a special volunteer regiment for especially dangerous operations behind enemy lines and are empowered to recruit criminals, like it says here, 'even right off the gallows.' But it doesn't say here that this includes people charged with treason and collaboration with the enemy!"

"Nor does it say the opposite. What's not forbidden is permitted."

"Yes, sir, strictly speaking that's true." Tangorn deduced from the fact that a mere warden was addressing the heir to the throne of Gondor simply as 'sir,' rather than 'Your Highness,' that the prince's fortunes were in real bad shape. "But that's an obvious oversight! After all, I have a responsibility . . . in time of war . . . Motherland's safety . . ." The official perked up a bit, having found something to fall back on at last. "In other words, I can't permit this without a written approval."

"Certainly we must not blindly follow the letter of our instructions in those trying times—we must confirm it with our patriotic sense . . . You're a patriot, as I can see, right?"

"Yes, sir . . . I mean Your Highness! I'm glad you understand my motivation . . ."

"Now listen closely, you prison rat," the prince continued in the same tone of voice. "Pay attention to my mandate, paragraph four. Not only can I accept serfs, criminals, and such as volunteers; I can draft, in the name of the King, the officials of all military-related institutions, of which yours is one. So: I will leave here either with those two, or with you, and—by the arrows of Oromë!—there, beyond Osgiliath, you'll have plenty of opportunities to prove your patriotism! Which is it going to be?"

They embraced only when the prison walls were far behind. Tangorn remembered that moment forever: he stood in the middle of the dark street, leaning on the prince's shoulder in sudden weakness; his eyes were closed and face turned up, and cold night fog, imbued with city smoke, was settling on it . . . Life and freedom—what else

does a man really need?

Faramir led them to the harbor through muddy dark streets of Pelargir without delay.

“Dammit, guys, why did you violate my order to stay put in Umbar? And what’s the story with your recall here?”

“We haven’t received that order. As for the recall, we expected you’d explain it to us as a member of the Royal Council.”

“I’m not on it any more. The Royal Council doesn’t need defeatists.”

“So that’s how it is . . . And this regiment of yours—did you invent it just to get us out?”

“Well . . . let’s say—not just for that.”

“That’s really sticking your neck out.”

“Whatever. I’m in a wonderful position right now—they can neither exile me any further than the front lines nor give me less than a battalion—so I’m milking it for all it’s worth.”

At the harbor they located a small ship. Two unusual-looking soldiers bundled in camouflage cloaks were snoozing right on the pier nearby. They greeted Faramir in a decidedly not-by-the-book manner, looked the two spies over appraisingly and started getting the ship under way—quite competently, as far as Tangorn could tell. “Leaving before dawn, Prince?” “You know, that there’s no caveat about traitors in that order is indeed an oversight; you want to stay to see how long it will take them to figure it out?”

Faramir was prophetic—the very next morning a courier brought ‘Amendment No. 1 to the Royal Decree 3014-227: No extension of amnesty for the criminals wishing to defend the Motherland to those guilty of crimes against the state’ to Pelargir. By that time the prince’s ship was halfway to the port of Harlond, where the Ithilien regiment was forming. They would not have been safe there, either, but when the policemen with an arrest warrant showed up in the Ithilienians’ camp, it turned out that the wanted men had just left—what a pity, less than an hour ago!—for the other shore of Anduin as part of a scouting party. Yes, the raid will be long—a month, maybe more; no, the party is working independently with no communications; if you wish, you can go beyond Osgiliath yourselves and look for them among the Orcs. What? Well, then I can’t help you, my apologies. Sergeant! See our guests off, they have urgent business in Minas Tirith!

Truly it is said that war excuses everything—in a short time the ‘traitor spies’ were simply forgotten for other, bigger things. Tangorn

spent the entire war in Ithilien, fighting without much enthusiasm but bravely and skillfully, protecting his soldiers with all he had—just like he used to protect his agents. This was actually the norm in their regiment, where the relationship between soldiers and officers was markedly non-traditional. Serfs working for their freedom, bandits working for their amnesty, foresters who had spent their lives guarding royal deer and poachers who had spent their lives hunting these same deer, adventurous aristocrats who used to hang out with Boromir and intellectual aristocrats from their pre-war circles—all blended in an amazing alloy that carried an indelible impression of their demiurge, Captain Faramir. Not surprisingly, Aragorn ordered the regiment disbanded right after the Pelennor victory.

Tangorn got to Mordor on his own, as a private person—a murderer drawn to the scene of his crime. The Cormallen battle over, all he saw was the victors' feast on the ruins of Barad-Dur. Watch, he ordered himself, watch the fruits of your work, and don't dare turn away! Then he accidentally ended up at Teshgol right during the 'mop-up,' and snapped . . .

Ever since then he lived with a firm conviction that the Higher Powers have granted him a second life, but only so that he could expiate the evil he inadvertently did in his pre-Teshgol life, rather than for free. Intuition told him back then to join Haladdin, but how was he to know that he made the right choice?..

Suddenly he realized with an absolute, other-worldly clarity: this second life had been granted to him as a loan, not permanently, and will be taken back the moment he succeeds in his mission. Yes, precisely like that: if he guesses wrong (or pretends to), he will live to a ripe old age; if he guesses right, he will obtain redemption at the price of his life. He has a right only to this unhappy choice, but this right is the only difference between himself and Aragorn's dead men.

This last thought—about Aragorn's corpses—brought Tangorn from his memories back to the twilit Three Stars Embankment. All right, consider the dead men. Most likely no one will ever find out where they came from (the Elves are real good at keeping secrets), but the Umbarian ships that delivered that nightmarish cargo to the walls of Minas Tirith are another matter: they all had owners, crews, registrations, and insurance policies. No doubt the Elvish agents have worked to bury this information, too (already a legend is circulating that this had been a pirate fleet about to sack Pelargir), but these events are recent and some tracks might not have been obliterated yet.

These tracks will lead him to people who chartered the ships, and those will lead him to so far unknown Elandar. It makes no sense to start the Game he and Haladdin proposed to play with Lórien at any lower level.

The funniest thing is that no one other than Mordorian agents will assist him in his search—the same people he and Grager were accused of conspiring with four years ago. Would he have ever thought that one day he will indeed be working with these guys? He could probably investigate this himself, but his network has been put to sleep and it would take at least two weeks to re-activate it. That's time he doesn't have, whereas Mordorians ought to have a lot of material about this event, otherwise their chief of station should be summarily dismissed. The question is whether they will want to share the information or contact him at all—he's nothing but a Gondorian to them, an enemy . . . In any event, tomorrow it will all be clear. The contact method Sharya-Rana gave them was as follows: come to the Seahorse Tavern in the harbor on an odd Tuesday (that's tomorrow), order a bottle of tequila and a saucer of sliced lemon, pay with a gold coin, talk about anything at all with one of the sailors at the bar, spend ten minutes or so at the table in the back left corner—and then walk to the Great Castamir Square, where the meeting and the exchange of passwords will occur behind the rightmost rostral column . . . So: shall he stroll the embankments a little longer and then head unhurriedly back to the hotel?

Someone called him: "You're waiting for a lady, noble sir—buy her a flower!" Tangorn looked around leisurely, and his breath seized for a moment. It was not that the flower girl was beauty personified; rather, her little basket was full of purple-golden *meotis* orchids, exceedingly rare this time of year. *Meotis* was Alviss' favorite flower.

CHAPTER 40

All these days he had been putting off seeing her under various pretexts—"never revisit the places where you have been happy." Since she had so unerringly prophesized that he was going to war, a lot of time passed and a lot of blood was spilled. Neither one of them was what they had been, so why walk the ruins and engage in necromancy? As he had found out, Alviss was now a respectable dame: her brilliant intuition had helped her make a sizable fortune on the stock market. She did not seem to be married, but was either engaged or betrothed to one of the pillars of the local business establishment—what the hell would she need with a restless and dangerous ghost from her past? Now all these wonderful deep defense fortifications lay in ruins.

"How much for your flowers, pretty one? I mean the whole basket?"

The girl—she looked about thirteen—stared at Tangorn in amazement. "You must not be from around here, noble sir! These are real *meotis*, they're expensive."

"Yes, I know." He dug in his pocket and realized that he was out of silver. "Will a dungan be enough?"

Suddenly, her brilliant eyes lost all sparkle; bewilderment and fear flashed through them, replaced by tired disgust. "A gold coin for a basket of flowers is way too much, noble sir," she said quietly. "I understand . . . you will take me to your place?"

The baron was never overly sentimental, but now his heart lurched with pity and anger.

"Stop it this second! Honestly, I only want the orchids. You haven't earned money *this way* before, right?"

She nodded and sniffed childishly. "A dungan is a lot of money for us, noble sir. Mama and sister and I can live for half a year on that."

"So take it and live on it," he grumbled, putting a golden disk bearing Sauron's profile in her hand. "And pray for my fortune, I'll

need it real soon . . .”

“So you’re a knight of Fortune, not a noble sir?” Now she was a wonderful blend of curiosity, childish excitement and fairly adult coquettishness. “I’d never guess!”

“Yeah, something like that,” the baron grinned, picked up the *meotis* basket, and headed towards Jasper Street, followed by her silvery voice: “You will be fortunate, sir knight, believe me! I will pray with all my might, and I have a lucky touch, you’ll see!”

Alviss’ old housemaid Tina opened the door and reeled back as if she had seen a ghost.

Aha, he thought, so my appearance is a real surprise and not everyone here will like it. With this thought he headed towards the living room and the sounds of music floating from there, leaving the old woman’s sad dirges behind—Tina must have realized that this visit from the past was not going to end well . . . The company in the living room was small and very refined; the music, superbly performed, was Akvino’s Third Sonata. At first, no one paid attention to the baron when he noiselessly appeared in the doorway, and he had a few moments to watch Alviss in her form-fitting dark blue dress from behind. Then she looked around, their eyes met, and Tangorn had two simultaneous thoughts, one stupider than the other: “Some women benefit from everything, even age” and “I wonder if she’ll drop her goblet?”

She moved towards him very, very slowly, as if against resistance, obviously external one; it seemed to him that music was the culprit—it had turned the room into a mountain stream rushing over boulders, and Alviss had to walk upstream, against the current. Then the rhythm changed, Alviss was trying to reach him, but the music resisted: it had turned from a foot-dragging mountain stream into an impenetrable blackberry thicket; Alviss had to tear through those prickly vines, it was difficult and painful, very painful, although she tried not to show it . . . Then it was all over: the music gave up, falling to Alviss’ feet in a spent heap, and she ran the tips of her fingers over his face, as if not yet believing:

“My God, Tan . . . my darling . . . you’re back . . .”

They must have stood in that embrace for an eternity, and then she took him by the hand and said quietly: “Come . . .”

Everything was like it always had been—and not. She was a totally different woman, and he was discovering her anew, like the first time. There were no volcanic passions, no exquisite caresses to suspend one

on a thread at the edge of an abyss of sweet oblivion.

There was an enormous all-engulfing tenderness, and they both dissolved in it quietly, having no other rhythm than the flutter of Arda pushing blindly through the prickly starscape . . . "We're sentenced to each other," she had once said; if so, then today the sentence had been carried out.

". . . Will you stay here long?"

"I don't know, Aly. Honestly, I don't know. I wish it were forever, but it might be for just a few days. Looks like this time it's the Higher Powers that will decide, not I."

"I understand. So you're in business again. Will you need help?"

"Unlikely. Maybe a few small things."

"Darling, you know I'll do anything for you—even make love in the missionary position!"

"Well, I'm sure that such a sacrifice won't be required," Tangorn laughed in the same vein,

"Perhaps a trifle—risk your life a couple of times."

"Yes, that'd be easier. So what do you need?"

"I was joking, Aly. You see, these games are really dangerous now, not like the good old times. Frankly, even my coming here was totally crazy, even though I checked real well . . .

I'll just have some coffee and plod back to my hotel now."

There was a moment of silence, and then she said in a strangely hoarse voice: "Tan, I'm afraid . . . I'm a broad, I can foresee . . . Don't go, I pray you!"

She's really out of sorts, never saw her like this . . . Oh, really—never? He remembered, from four years ago: "You're going to war, Tan." This just keeps getting worse, he thought with displeasure. Meanwhile she clung to him fiercely and just kept repeating desperately: "Stay with me, please! I've never asked anything of you, not once in all these years . . . Just this once, for me!"

He gave in just to calm her down (what does it really matter from where I come to the Seahorse Tavern tomorrow?), so Mongoose's team had waited for him in vain at the Lucky Anchor that night.

Very well—he'll come tomorrow if not tonight. Rather than chase him all over the city, better to wait for him near his lair, there's no hurry. Besides, it'd be imprudent to divide the capture team: the baron is, after all, the third sword of Gondor, something to reckon with . . .

Mongoose knew how to wait better than anyone.

The Umbarian Secret Service, well-hidden in the dusty ink-smelling burrows of the Foreign Ministry under the deliberately ambiguous plaque DSD—Department of Special Documentation—is a stealthy organization. Even the location of its headquarters is a state secret: the Green House on Swamp Alley that 'well-informed' high officials and senators mention sometimes in appropriately hushed voices is actually only an archive holding documents declassified after the one hundred twenty years prescribed by law. Only three people know the name of the Department's Director: the Chancellor, the Minister of Defense, and the Prosecutor General (the Office's employees may kill only on the Prosecutor's sanction, although sometimes they obtain it after the fact), and only he himself knows the names of his four Vice-Directors.

Unlike the secret services that are set up on the police model (these tend to never lose their penchant for pompous headquarters buildings on major streets and for scaring their own citizens with tall tales of their omnipotence and omnipresence), DSD had arisen more like a security service of a major trading corporation, and is above all concerned with always staying in the shadows. The Department's organizational structure follows that of the *zamorro*[56] (the Umbarian crime syndicates): a system of isolated cells connected only through their leaders, who in turn form the second- and third-level cells. The Office's employees live under specially developed false identities both at home and abroad; they never carry weapons (unless required by their assumed identity) and never reveal their employment under any circumstances. The oath of silence and *umberto*[57] (Grager had once described this principle to Tangorn as "one dungan to enter, a hundred to leave") bond its members in a kind of a knightly order. Hard as it may be to believe, knowing Umbarian mores, during its three hundred years of existence there have been only a handful of betrayals in the Department (which changes its official name with the regularity of a snake shedding its skin).

The Department's mandate is 'to provide the top officials of the Republic with precise, timely, and objective information about the situation in the country and beyond.' Obviously only an independent and uninterested source can be objective, and therefore by law the DSD only collects information but does not participate in related political or military decision-making and bears no responsibility for the results of those decisions; it is nothing but a measuring device that is categorically barred from interfering with the reality it measures.

This separation of duties is truly wise. Otherwise, intelligence services either placate the powerful by telling them what they want to hear or get out of control, which leads to such niceties as gathering compromising information on its own citizens, provocations, or irresponsible sabotage abroad; all of the above is justified by carefully selected information).

Therefore, from a legal standpoint, everything that went on that summer evening in a certain undistinguished mansion where the meeting between DSD Director Almandin[58], his Vice-Director in charge of domestic operations and agent networks Jacuzzi, and Admiral Carnero's chief of staff Flag Captain Makarioni took place (which required all parties to overcome the eternal mutual dislike between the 'spooks' and the 'grunts' common to all worlds), had a very definite name: traitorous conspiracy. Not that any of them lusted for power, not at all—it was just that the spies clearly foresaw the consequences of their small prosperous country's absorption by greedy despotic Gondor, and could not follow their cowardly 'top officials.'

"How's your chief's health, Flag Captain?"

"Quite satisfactory. The stiletto only bruised the lung, and as for the rumors that the Admiral is at death's door, that's our work. His Excellency has no doubts that in two weeks he'll be on his feet and nothing will keep him from personally leading Operation Sirocco."

"As for us, we have bad news, Flag Captain. Our people report from Pelargir that Aragorn had radically speeded up the preparations of the invasion fleet. They estimate that it will be fully ready in about five weeks . . ."

"Thunder and devils! That's the same time as ours!"

"Precisely. I don't have to tell you that during the last few days before deployment an army or a fleet is totally helpless, like a shedding lobster. They're getting ready in Pelargir, we—in Barangar, practically head-to-head; the advantage will be a day or two, and the one who gains those few days will be the one to catch the other unprepared in his home port. The difference is that they're preparing for war openly, whereas we're hiding our work from our own government and have to waste two-thirds of our resources on secrecy and disinformation . . . Flag Captain, can you speed up the preparations in Barangar in any way?"

"Only at the cost of some secrecy . . . but we'll have to risk it now, there's no other way. So the most important thing now is to throw 12 Shore Street off the scent, but that's your job, as I see it."

After the sailor made his goodbyes, the DSD chief looked questioningly at his comrade.

The spies made a funny pair—the portly, seemingly half-asleep Almandin and the lean Jacuzzi, swift as a barracuda. Over the years of working together they have learned to understand each other with not even a few words, but a few looks.

“Well?”

“I’ve gotten our materials on the Gondorian chief of station . . .”

“Captain of the Secret Guard Marandil; cover—second embassy secretary.”

“The same. An exceptional dirtbag, even compared to the rest of them . . . I wonder if they’ve shipped their worst dregs over here, to Umbar?”

“I don’t think so. These guys work the same way in Minas Tirith right now, except they dump the bodies into outhouses rather than the canals . . . Whatever. Stay focused.”

“All right. Marandil. A real bouquet of virtues, let me tell you . . .”

“Have you decided to recruit him based on a flower from that bouquet?”

“Not exactly. Can’t get him on anything from his past, since Aragorn had pardoned all their sins. On the other hand, the present . . . first, he’s appallingly unprofessional; second, he has no spine and can’t handle pressure at all. Should he make a really big screw-up on which we can pressure him, he’s ours. Our task is to help him screw up.”

“All right, develop this angle. In the meantime, toss them some bone to deflect attention from Barangar Bay. Give them, say . . . oh, everything we have on Mordorian agents here.”

“What the hell would they want with it now?”

“Nothing, really, but as you’ve correctly pointed out, they’re appallingly unprofessional.

Shark reflex: swallow first, then consider whether it was a good idea. Surely they will now eviscerate the Mordorian network, which nobody needs any more, and forget everything else. This will also count as a goodwill gesture from our side; it will give us some breathing room while you set a trap for Marandil.”

The thick DSD dossier on the Mordorian network in Umbar was delivered to 12 Shore Street that same evening, causing a condition approaching euphoria. Among other tips it contained the following: ‘Seahorse Tavern, 11 AM on odd Tuesdays; order a bottle of tequila

with sliced lemon and sit at a table in the back left corner.’

CHAPTER 41

Umbar, Seahorse Tavern

June 3, 3019

It was a few minutes to eleven when Tangorn pushed open the door (crudely fashioned out of ship planking) and went down the slippery steps to the common hall that forever stank of smoke, stale sweat, and vomit. Few people were here this early, but of those present some were already well inebriated. In a corner a couple of waiters were unenthusiastically beating up a weeping bum: must have tried to leave without paying or else stole some trinket. Nobody paid any attention to the altercation—it was obvious that such performances were part of the service here. This Seahorse Tavern was some dive.

Nobody stared at the baron—his choice of disguise for the day (a gaudy player's outfit) was perfect. Four dice-playing 'skuas' (minor port thugs)[59] with enormous golden rings on their tattooed paws openly tried to estimate Tangorn's relative position in the underworld, but having apparently reached no agreement, went back to their game. Tangorn leaned casually on the bar and scanned the hall, leisurely pushing an oar-sized sandalwood toothpick around his mouth. Not that he expected to figure out whoever was on watch here (he had enough respect for his Mordorian colleagues), but why not try? Two sailors were sipping rum at the bar, Anfalasians by the sound of them, one older, the other still a teenager. "Where'd you come from, guys?" the baron inquired good-naturedly. The older man, as was to be expected, looked through the landlubber and did not deign to answer, but the younger one could not resist the temptation to respond with the classic: "Horses come; we sail." These two looked authentic.

Having thus satisfied the ‘talk with a sailor’ requirement, Tangorn imperiously tossed a Vendotenian gold nyanma on the bar: “Tequila, barman—but only the best!”

The barman, whose droopy moustache made him resemble a seal, sniggered: “We’ve only one kind, man—the best, same as the worst. Want some?”

“Hell, whatcha gonna do? . . . All right, slice me some lemon for a chaser, then.”

Right after he settled down at a table in the rear left corner with his tequila he caught a movement with a corner of his eye and knew immediately, even before identifying the foe, that he was busted. They certainly were here before he was, which meant they hadn’t tailed him here; therefore, the contact itself is compromised—they were waiting for a Mordorian courier and now their wait paid off. What a stupid way to blow the mission! The four ‘skuas’ split up, two taking up positions by the front door and the other two heading his way, smoothly navigating around tables, both with right hands inside their jackets. Had the baron had the *Slumber-maker* with him, he could have dealt with those characters easily and without even damaging them too much, but a sword would have been unharmonious with his chosen disguise, so now, unarmed, he was their lawful prey. So much for “real pros don’t carry weapons!” For a moment he toyed with a really crazy idea: smash the bottle against the table and . . . He restrained himself: what the hell are you thinking? A ‘rosette’ is no sword[60], it’s no good against four; no, you can only count on your head now . . . your head and your Fortune. But first, got to foul up their routine and buy time. Which was why he did not even rise to meet them; rather, he waited until an ominous “Hands on the table and stay seated” sounded right above his ear, and then turned slightly towards the speaker and spat through his teeth: “Idiots! To ruin such an operation . . .” Then he sighed and tiredly told the one on the right: “Shut your trap, cretin, before a nazgúl flies in!”

“You’re coming with us, and no fooling,” that one informed him, but there was discernible doubt in his voice: they had not expected the captured ‘Orc’ to speak with a chiseled Minas Tirith accent.

“With you, of course, where else? To administer an acid enema to the imbeciles that stick their noses everywhere without informing the HQ . . . But, with your permission,” the baron continued with mocking politeness, “I’ll still have my drink—to my captain’s badge, now nothing but a dream . . . Don’t stand over me like the White Towers!

Where am I gonna go? Pat me down for weapons, if you want, I'm not carrying any."

The 'skua' on the right looked ready to salute. The one on the left, however, either was not impressed, or was, but knew the manual better. He sat down across from the baron and motioned his comrade to take position behind their quarry.

"Keep your hands on the table, otherwise . . . you know." With those words he poured Tangorn a shot of tequila, explaining: "I'll serve you myself, just in case."

"Wonderful!" smirked the baron (actually, there's nothing wonderful about the situation: one foe is right in front, tracking his face and eyes, the other is invisible behind his back, ready to smash his head—can't make it any worse.) "Will you lick my finger, too?"

When the man's eyes flared with anger, Tangorn laughed conciliatorily, as if just now realizing his mistake: "Sorry, buddy, no offense meant. I just twigged that you must not have been in this town very long and don't know how to drink tequila. You all probably think it's moonshine, bad hooch, right? No, nothing of the sort. I mean, sure, if you drink it by the glass without a chaser, then yeah, it stinks; but really it's great stuff, you just have to know how to drink it. The thing here," Tangorn relaxed against the back of his chair and dreamily half-closed his eyes, "is to alternate its taste with salt and sourness. Watch this: you put a pinch of salt on your thumbnail—have to lick it for the salt to stay there." With those words he reached towards the small salt-and-pepper bowl in the middle of the table; the 'skua' tensed and put his hand inside his jacket again, but did not yell "Hands down!"—apparently actually listening and learning. "Now you touch the salt with just the tip of your tongue, and whoa!" Damn, damn, damn—what rotgut they serve here! "Now the lemon, the lemon! Ni-i-i-ce! . . . Now, here's another great method—pour me another one, since you're my waiter today! This one is with pepper rather than salt." Again he reached for the bowl, but stopped in mid-movement and turned to the other 'skua' in annoyance: "Listen, buddy, move back a bit, willya? I hate it when people breathe garlic in my ear!"

"My position is according to the manual," the man answered crossly. Little fool, thought the baron, the manual says first and foremost that you must not talk to me. His 'g's are soft, he must be from Lebennin . . . actually, that's totally unimportant; what is important is that he's not directly behind me but rather a step to the

left, and is six feet tall less a couple of inches . . . Is this it? Yes; the head did what it had to, now it's Fortune's turn.

A second later Tangorn, still carelessly slouched on his chair, reached the bowl of powdered red pepper with the fingers of his left hand and tossed it behind his back in a swift casual movement, without looking, straight into the Lebenninian's face, simultaneously slamming the toe of his boot into the leg bone of his *vis-à-vis*.

It is a well-known fact that a startled person always inhales, so the peppered man was now out of commission for the foreseeable future; the one across from him gurgled: "Aw shit!" and collapsed under the table in a twist of pain, but not for long: the baron failed to break his leg. The other two were already charging at him from the door, one wielding an Umbarian dagger, the other a flail, knocking chairs over, while Tangorn was still fishing inside the jacket of the Lebenninian convulsing on the floor, thinking detachedly to himself: if he only has some toy like brass knuckles or a spring knife—game over . . . But no—praise Tulkas!—it was a large Umbarian dagger like the ones the mountain men of the Peninsula carry on their belts, a half-yard pointed blade good for both stabbing and slashing; not much, but still a weapon of a warrior rather than a thief.

He engaged the pair and quickly saw that he would not get away cheaply: these guys were no cowards and knew their short weapons almost as well as he did. When his left arm went slack from a glancing blow with the flail, while the third opponent came up from behind, limping but still in fighting shape, the baron knew that this was serious—really serious—and began fighting in earnest.

The sullen gondolier, paid with a silver castamir, tied up at a decrepit cargo pier and returned a few minutes later with new clothes for his passenger—rags compared to a player's cockatoo garb, but with no blood on them. Tangorn changed on the run to save time, putting away the captured dagger and the silver badge he took off the neck of one of the 'skuas'—Karanir, Sergeant of the Secret Guard of His Majesty Elessar Elfstone, had no further need of it. The third sword of Gondor had escaped, leaving a dead body and two wounded behind; actually, the wounded were most likely already dealt with, since the patrons of the Seahorse Tavern liked secret policemen no better than those of any port dive in any of the worlds.

He himself got away with two minor wounds—scratches, really; the

numb arm was a bigger problem, but it was the least of the baron's current worries. After all, he had a few remedies from Haladdin's medkit with him. So what's the situation? Four 'skuas' have disappeared without a trace; they won't be missed for two or three hours, but this timing advantage is all he has. Pretty soon the entire Gondorian spy force will start hunting him, along with—and this is much worse—the local police. Horribly corrupted as they are, they know their business second to none; in less than two hours their informants will let them know that the performance at the Seahorse Tavern was given by none other than their old acquaintance Baron Tangorn, whereupon they'll immediately stake out the port and start combing the city closer to evening. In spy slang his situation is known as 'leper with a bell': he has no right to either call on his old agents for help (his pre-war information on that network may very well be at the Gondorian station), or to appeal to the Umbarian Secret Service for protection (they will only cover him if he admits to being Faramir's man, which is flatly impossible). The saddest thing is that he had lost all possibility of contact with the Mordorian network here—the only people who could have helped him reach Elandar. To make a long story short, he failed his task and is now marked for death; that none of it is his personal fault is totally irrelevant—Haladdin's mission will now never be completed.

So now he has no agents, no contacts, no safe houses; what does he have? He has money—lots of money, over four hundred dungans in six caches—plus the well-hidden *mithril* coat that Haladdin gave him to sell in case he could not locate Sharya-Rana's gold. He has a couple of reserve hideouts from the old times, which will be dug up in a couple of days at most; he has some old connections in the underworld, which could be stale. That seems to be it . . . He doesn't even have the *Slumber-maker*—the sword is still at Alviss' house, and returning to either Jasper Street or the Happy Anchor is absolutely out of the question.

By the time the gondolier let him off near the harbor warehouses, it was clear to him that the only sane tactic in such overwhelmingly appalling circumstances was to bluff without restraint—to mount an attack rather than crawl into a hidey-hole.

CHAPTER 42

Umbar, 12 Seashore Street

June 4, 3019

Mongoose walked unhurriedly down the embassy's corridors. The worse and more dangerous a situation is, the more deliberate, unhurried, and polite must the commander be (at least in public); to judge by the serene smile firmly plastered to Mongoose's face, the situation was the worst it could possibly be.

He found the chief of station, Captain Marandil, in his office.

"Hail, Captain! I'm Lieutenant Mongoose, here's my badge. I am carrying out a top-secret assignment here in Umbar. Regretfully, I'm having some problems . . ."

Marandil did not even stop gazing at his nails; it was obvious that some invisible shred of skin on his left pinkie was of much more interest to him than some visitor's problems. Just then the door banged open, and a burly guy almost seven feet tall pushed the lieutenant aside most unceremoniously:

"Time to start, boss! The girl's first class!"

"You guys must've gotten yours dipped already," the captain grumbled good-naturedly.

"No way, sir! The boss gets first dibs, we regular folks follow . . . but the lady's already undressed and waiting impatiently."

"Let's go, then, before she gets a chill!"

The big man guffawed; the captain started getting out from behind the table, but caught Mongoose's look. Something in that look suddenly made him feel that he had to explain:

"She's from last night's catch, a Mordorian agent! The bitch'll wind up in the canal anyway . . ."

Mongoose was already dispassionately studying the kitschy ornaments on the ceiling (rather tasteless stuff, really); he was genuinely concerned that the overwhelming fury he felt was about to spill out through his eyes. Sure, spying is a cruel business; sure, a third-degree interrogation is, well, an interrogation in the third degree; sure, the 'girl' should have understood the risks before she got into these games, that's all fair and by the book . . . What was not by the book was how these two colleagues of his behaved—like they were not in His Majesty's service, but rather . . . Actually, to hell with them all—so far, at least, straightening out the resident spies was not within Task Force Féanor's ambit. The lieutenant addressed Marandil again in such a gently persuasive tone that any competent person would have immediately guessed how serious he was:

"My apologies, Captain, but my business brooks no delay, believe me. I'm sure that your subordinates can handle this job adequately without you."

The big guy positively bent over with laughter, and then drawled, encouraged by his boss's sneer: "Forget it, Lieutenant! You know how they say: three out of four problems solve themselves, and the fourth is unsolvable. Better come with us to the basement—the cutie'll service you first, you being a guest and all. She'll lick you or you can lick her . . ."

Marandil surreptitiously enjoyed this put-down of the visitor from the capital. Of course, he'll have to assist, but first let the man understand that here, in Umbar, he's nobody, and his name is nothing . . .

"How are you standing in front of a superior officer?" Mongoose inquired in a flat voice, looking Marandil's henchman up and down, lingering on the tips of his boots a bit.

"What's wrong with how I'm standing? I'm not falling over, right?"

"That's an idea," the lieutenant said thoughtfully and moved forward in a light dancelike move. He was a foot shorter and half as wide as his opponent, so the big man struck carefully to avoid accidentally killing him with his melon of a fist. He struck and froze in amazement: Mongoose did not even dodge the blow or move back—he simply disappeared into thin air. The man stood gaping until someone tapped his shoulder from behind—and he actually turned around, the fool . . .

Mongoose stepped over the prostrated body—fastidiously, as if it was a pile of manure—stopped in front of Marandil, who involuntarily

retreated behind the table, panic clearly visible in his eyes, and said drily:

"Your subordinates can barely keep their feet. Are you starving them or something?"

"Hey, you're cool, Lieutenant!" the other managed to say. "Don't be offended; I just wanted to see you in action . . ."

"I figured as much. Have you seen enough?"

"Are you maybe one of those, what's their name—*nin'yokve*?"

"That's a different technique, albeit based on the same principle. Back to business.

Regarding fun in the basement—I'm afraid you'll have to wait, perhaps even skip it. Tell your people to start without you. Oh, and let them remove this impudent youth."

Mongoose turned down both wine and coffee and got straight to business.

"Yesterday your people tried apprehending Baron Tangorn at the Seahorse Tavern. What does this mean? Have you forgotten that Ithilien is a vassal of the Crown of Gondor?"

"We had no idea it was Tangorn! He gave Mordorian recognition signals, so my boys thought he was their courier."

"Aha!" Mongoose closed his eyes for a second. "This changes things. So he is undoubtedly tied to Mordor. Well, he's useless to them now, too."

"Don't worry, we'll get him before nightfall. It's not just us looking, we've activated the Umbar police. They've already found one of his lairs, he'd left it literally half an hour before they showed up . . ."

"That's why I'm here. You must immediately stop looking for Tangorn. Tell the police that this was an accident, a miscommunication between two friendly secret services . . . especially since this does resemble reality."

"I don't understand how you . . ."

"You don't have to understand anything, Captain. Are you familiar with the letter G?"

Marandil took one look at the square of silk in the lieutenant's hand and visibly blanched.

"The baron is my responsibility, and he must not concern you. Call your people off, but most importantly—I repeat—stop the police immediately! Should Tangorn fall into their hands rather than mine, it'll be a catastrophe that will cost us both our heads."

"But, Lieutenant, sir . . . He killed four of my people!"

Mongoose shrugged. “He did the right thing. Fools that get into conversations with their targets ought to be killed on the spot. Now: you stop looking for Tangorn and simply wait.

It’s not unlikely that he’ll show up soon one way or another . . .”

“Show up? Is he nuts?”

“Oh no, not at all. However, he’s apparently in a bind, and as far as I understand him, he’s inclined to bet the farm in such situations. Should you learn anything about him, let me know right away: have a Dol Amroth pennant hoisted under the Gondorian flag on the embassy roof, and soon someone will pay you a visit. Thereafter you’ll forget ever hearing the name Tangorn. Understood?”

“Yes, sir! Listen, Lieutenant, we’ve learned that he used to have a broad here . . .”

“Seven Jasper Street?”

“Ye-e-es . . .” Marandil drawled in disappointment. “So you know already?”

“Certainly. It looks like he’d spent the night before last there. So?”

“So shouldn’t we shake something out of her?”

Mongoose grimaced tiredly. “What do you expect to shake out of her? What positions they’ve used and how many orgasms she’s had? What else can she tell? Tangorn is not enough of an idiot to talk business with his lover.”

“Still, maybe . . .”

“Captain, I repeat: forget everything that has anything to do with Tangorn—these are my problems now. Should you meet him in the street, just cross to the other side and then have the Dol Amroth pennant hoisted, all right? By the way, concerning your problems: I understand that you’re now harvesting the old Mordorian network. Forgive my question, but—what for?”

“What do you mean—what for?”

“Is it any kind of an obstacle to you? In any event, why have you started grabbing the agents, instead of putting a watch on them to figure out their connections?”

“We were in a hurry, just in case the DSD is double-dealing . . .”

“DSD?! Was it they who gave you the Mordorian network?”

“Well, yes. A goodwill gesture . . .”

“Captain! That’s a fairy tale for retarded children! Try thinking this over one more time—why would they make you such a princely gift? What do they want in exchange? Well, whatever, those are your problems, like I said; do what you think best. Goodbye!”

Mongoose headed for the door, but turned around half-way:

“Oh, and one more thing, Captain. In anticipation of your professional enthusiasm . . .” He hesitated, as if choosing the right words, then put scruples aside: “Anyway: if any of your men comes any closer than three arrow-flights to Jasper Street, I’ll feed you a salad of your own balls. Understand?”

Their eyes met for only a moment, but it was enough for Marandil to comprehend clearly: this one will follow through.

. . . Mongoose’s foresight came true the very next day. A certain Inspector Vaddari[61], one of Umbar police operatives, desired an urgent meeting with Marandil downtown. The inspector was not one of those policemen who worked for the Gondorian embassy directly, but was quite aware of all these games: he was an old and experienced detective who knew the seamy underside of life like no one else. He should have made commissar long ago both by seniority and by merit, but had not—and therefore took bribes with no qualms. It should be mentioned that corruption was a hallowed tradition of the Umbar police (both colleagues and honest citizens treated a policeman or a customs officer who would not be bribed with cautious suspicion: “Better not turn your back on this guy”), but unlike some of his coworkers, Vaddari always delivered the services purchased and never blamed circumstances beyond his control.

“Mister Secretary, your people were looking for a certain Tangorn when suddenly the search was called off yesterday. Are you still interested in this man?”

Marandil leaned forward cautiously: “Well . . . I suppose I am.”

“I’m prepared to tell you exactly where he’s going to be tonight, if we agree on the price.”

“May I ask where the information comes from?”

“You may. He sent me a letter with a meeting proposal.”

“And why did you decide to sell out a potential client?”

“I haven’t even considered that. It’s just that he hasn’t listed secrecy as one of the conditions of the meeting, so I’m strictly following the letter of the agreement. If this Tangorn doesn’t foresee such a possibility, then I don’t want to deal with such a fool.”

“Hmm . . . So how much do you want?”

“Three dungans.”

“What?! Are you freaking nuts, man? Like, totally disconnected from reality?”

“My part is to offer . . .”

“You should know that I really don’t give a crap about this whole business!”

“Who’re you kidding, buddy? I’m an operative, not a mark! First you turn the city upside down for a day and a half looking for this dude, and then—so sorry, there’s been a mix-up!

An idiot would know that there’s some other outfit looking for him now, and the police’s been shunted aside. So I’ll have to figure out myself who these other folks are, while time’s a-wasting!”

“All right—two!”

“I said three and I meant three; I ain’t a peanut seller. Quit haggling already, it’s not like you’re paying with your own money!”

“All right, whatever. Two now and the third when we take him on your info.”

“’Whatever’ is right—I tell you when and where, the rest is your problem. All three right now.”

“What if you’re cheating me?”

“Listen, we’re adults in business, no? I’m not some wino offering you a pirate treasure map for a bottle, am I?”

Having pocketed the coins, Vaddari laid out the set-up:

“Know Castamir Square?”

“The one with a lake in the middle and three canals opening into it?”

“The same. The lake is round, a hundred fifty yards across; the canals open into it a hundred twenty degrees apart—counting from the rostral columns, at twelve, four, and eight o’clock.

The embankment isn’t unbroken—there are stairways down to the waterline, two between each pair of canals, that makes six. Seven in the evening I must be at the stairs to the right of the eight o’clock canal, dressed in a scarlet cape and a hat with black plumage. A water taxi will arrive by one of the canals; the gondolier will let me board after seeing those signs and will then follow my directions. I’m supposed to cruise from stair to stair, not one after the other, but rather crossing the lake: seven o’clock, eleven, three, and so on. Get it?”

“Yes, quite.”

“There’s almost no traffic on the lake at that time of day; if any other gondolas show up, I’m supposed to park and wait until they leave. Tangorn will come down one of the stairs once he’s sure that there’s no danger, and board my gondola. He will be in disguise and I will know him when he takes out a purple handkerchief and waves it

twice. That's it. Good luck, Secretary, and good evening."

Vaddari got up and headed out of the coffeehouse where they have met, thinking in passing that he'd bet his life on Tangorn making fools of these guys.

The captain returned to the embassy and filled out a field agent expense report first thing: 4 (four) dungans. He was tempted to put in five, but restrained himself: greed kills, while a birdie pecks a little here and there and is satisfied. So, should he raise the Dol Amroth pennant, and hand Tangorn to that cutthroat from the capital on a silver platter? Like hell, he suddenly decided. Such opportunities come up but once in a lifetime; I'll capture him myself, and the winner is always right[62]. He remembered Mongoose's eyes and shivered: maybe he should play it safe? Then he calmed himself: no, this is a sure thing. I have the time and place of the meeting, I have thirty-two operatives and five hours to prepare—the sun-like demiurge Aritan supposedly managed to create the entire Arda in five hours, complete with fish in the water, birds in the air, beasts on the ground, dragons in the fire, and man with all his disgusting habits . . .

CHAPTER 43

Umbar, Great Castamir Square

June 5, 3019

"How many have you counted, Jacuzzi?"

"Thirty-two."

"I can only see twelve . . ."

"I'd rather not point them out."

"Heavens, no! You, after all, are the operative, while I'm just an analyst, so you rule here."

Almandin relaxed against the back of a wicker chair, enjoying his wine. They were sitting under a striped awning of one of the many small open cafes on Castamir Square, almost directly under a rostral column liberally studded with the prows of captured Gondorian ships, lazily observing the milling of the idle evening crowd. "If there's indeed thirty-two of them, then Marandil has brought out his entire staff, save the embassy guards. Do you see our performer, by any chance?"

Jacuzzi looked over the bustling embankment of the grubby round lake one more time.

Gentlemen and naval officers, street vendors and gaudy street women, itinerant musicians and fortune-tellers, mendicants and knights of Fortune . . . He immediately recognized all the Gondorian spies among the throng (although most of them, to their credit, were pretty well disguised), but to his great disappointment he could not identify the baron. Unless, of course . . . no, that's crazy.

"It looks like he had recognized these guys, too, gave up and tiptoed away."

"That's what a professional would do," nodded Almandin, "but the

baron will do something else entirely . . . want to bet?"

"Wait a moment!" the Vice-Director of Operations glanced at his chief in surprise. "Do you consider Tangorn to be a dilettante, then?"

"Not a dilettante, my dear Jacuzzi, but an amateur. Do you understand the difference?"

"To be honest—no, not quite."

"A professional is not the person who's mastered all the techniques of his craft—the baron has no problems in this regard—but the one who always delivers on his orders, regardless of the circumstances. It so happens that the baron had never worked for hire; he is bound by neither oath nor *umberto* and is used to the unbelievable luxury of doing only things he himself approves of. If an order contradicts his notions of honor or runs against his conscience, he will simply ignore it, and to hell with the consequences—both for himself and his goals. You can see that such a man belongs in a Vendotenian monastery, rather than in any intelligence service."

"I think I know what you mean," Jacuzzi nodded thoughtfully. "The baron lives in a world of moral scruples and stereotypes that are unthinkable to you and me . . . By the way, I was refreshing my memory of his dossier the other day and came across an interesting tidbit of friendly banter over a few drinks. Someone asked him whether he could hit a woman if he had to. He had spent some time seriously thinking about it, and then admitted that perhaps he'd be able to kill a woman, but never to hit one, under any circumstances. His dossier is anyway a rather curious read—it's more of a literary review than a dossier; about half of it is poems and translations. I even thought that no one outside of our Department has a more complete collection of Tangorn's *takatos* . . ."

"Too bad that they won't be published until a hundred twenty years from now under the declassification law . . . Aha! A gondola! So, would you like to bet that he's going to pull some crazy stunt and fool all of these guys?"

"I think that it would be more appropriate for us to pray for his Fortune, or rather Marandil's blunder . . ."

A small three-seater gondola touched shore at one of the stairways descending to the water to take on a gentleman in a scarlet cape and a hat with black plumage, and started to cross the lake leisurely. Suddenly a sleepy expression appeared on Jacuzzi's face; he unhurriedly took out a gold-plated sandalwood pencil, wrote a few words on a napkin, turned it over and handed the pencil to Almandin,

saying: “All right, it’s a bet.” The other man also wrote something on another napkin, and both returned to silently watching the developments.

The gondola described a not-quite-complete triangle and came back to the stair next to the one where it started. That spot was perennially occupied by a band of lepers, wrapped in head-to-toe striped robes, who solicited alms there. The so-called cold leprosy is both fatal and incurable, but unlike the ‘hot leprosy’ it is not particularly contagious (the only way to catch it is by squashing one of the many small boils covering the leper’s face and hands, or by doing something like sharing his cup), so its sufferers were never expelled from human settlements. The Hakimians[63] of Khand even considered them especially desired by God.

Every day those mournful figures in their striped robes silently appealed to the citizens’ mercy, as if inviting them to compare the lepers’ plight to whatever they considered troublesome in their own lives. They were motionless to the point of appearing to be some architectural element like the gondola tie-up posts, so when one of these cloth-draped statues suddenly got up and headed towards the stair, limping slightly, it was clear that something was afoot.

The leper stepped on the top stair and took a purple handkerchief out of his sleeve.

Immediately a bunch of idle men surrounding a street performer who was juggling three daggers about twenty yards away split up—two headed left and right, cutting off the robed man’s escape routes, while the other two and the juggler himself, snatching the flying blades out of the air, went straight for the prey. It became clear that the man had miscalculated—he started his descent while the gondola was too far away, about fifteen yards from the shore.

He might still have made it to the safety of the boat if not for the cowardice of the man in the scarlet cape: when he saw the three armed pursuers, he panicked, and the gondolier, obeying his frantic gestures, began pulling away, abandoning his partner. The man in the robe ran down to the last step and halted—there was no escape or help coming. A couple of seconds later the ‘idlers’ caught up with him; two pinned his arms behind his back while the ‘juggler’ hit him in the liver, followed up with a chop to the neck on the rebound. It was over, the prey bagged.

However, when they dragged the ‘leper’ up to the embankment, an enraged crowd gathered instantly: the locals were unused to sick

people being treated that way. Two Hakimians in yellow pilgrims' caps who happened to be nearby intervened for 'the man of God,' and the scandal began swiftly developing into a scuffle. Marandil's men were fiercely pushing their way towards the scene through the thickening throng, and a police whistle was already trilling unnervingly somewhere close. Meanwhile, the man in the scarlet cape came ashore three stairways from the fray, let the gondola go and left unhurriedly; it was clear that the false leper's fate was not of much concern to him.

"What do you think of the performance, dear Jacuzzi?"

"Excellent. Truly, the theater had lost a great director in Tangorn."

The Vice-Director of Operations' facial expression did not seem to change, but Almandin had known his subordinate for years and could tell that the terrible tension that had gripped him for the last ten minutes was gone, and a hint of a triumphant smile was beginning to form in the corners of his mouth. Well, this was his victory, too . . .

Jacuzzi called on a passing waiter: "A bottle of Núrnen, my friend!"

"Aren't you afraid of spooking our luck?"

"Not at all. It's all over, and Marandil is as good as ours."

Waiting for the wine, they watched the proceedings with interest. The fight ended abruptly, although the noise increased, and an empty space cleared in the middle; the robed man was lying there, trying in vain to get up. Meanwhile, the 'idlers' and the 'juggler' had suddenly lost all interest in their victim: not only did they let him go, but they were trying to melt into the crowd; one of them was looking at his palms with abject horror on his face.

"See, chief, they've finally figured out that the leper is a real one. This is definitely not a case of 'better late than never . . . ' While apprehending him they must've squashed a dozen boils on his hands and got smeared in pus, so all three are dead men now. Can't blame their emotional reaction; to learn that you've got less than three months to live (if you can call it life) must be quite, quite disconcerting."

"The leper must have profited by all this, I suppose?"

"That's for sure! I think that each blow must've netted him at least a silver castamir: Tangorn is not one of those idiots who try to save on small details. What do they call it in the North: creaming crap, yes?"

When the golden Núrnen bubbled in their goblets like a mountain brook, Jacuzzi asked impudently (today he had the right): "Who's paying?" Almandin nodded, turned over the napkins, compared their

notes, and acknowledged honestly: “My treat.” His napkin bore a single word: *gondolier*, while the Vice-Director of Operations’ inscription was: *T. is gondolier; diversion onshore*.

CHAPTER 44 [64]

When the last vestiges of the scandal died down and the leper regained his customary place, Almandin asked with curiosity:

"Listen, suppose you were planning this instead of that idiot Marandil. I'm not asking whether you'd capture the baron—that'd be an insult—but I'd like to know how many people you'd need as against his thirty-two?"

Yakudze spent half a minute considering this while scanning the embankment, and then concluded:

"Three. Not any kind of super-swordsmen or hand-to-hand experts, either; the only necessary skill is minimal facility with silk throw nets. Note that all three canals join the lake under low bridges, less than ten feet clearance. I'd put a man on each bridge; that the target was the gondolier was pretty obvious, but in any event we'd have prearranged signals. When he's passing under a bridge, the operative would drop the net, then jump down straight into the gondola and jab him with a *mantzenilla*-smeared needle . . . You're absolutely right, chief—this adventure of his was a total gamble, a trap for fools. The leper diversion was very good, but that doesn't change the fact that no professional would have risked his neck like that. He is, indeed, only an amateur—a brilliant and lucky one, but he'll be lucky once or twice and the third time he'll break his neck . . ."

"Look at that," Almandin interrupted, pointing with his eyes across the square, "our incomparable Vaddari already has poor Marandil by all the private parts in his rough hand! This one will get his every time . . . By the way, are you going to recruit the captain yourself or send somebody?"

The café looked exactly the same as the one where the DSD bigwigs sat—the same wicker chairs, the same striped awning—but the mood

at the table was much less celebratory. The Gondorian station chief sat in stunned silence, staring at the badge on the table in front of him (Karanir, Sergeant of the Secret Guard of His Majesty Elessar Elfstone) and nodding dumbly to the phrases Vaddari was doling out:

"Today the baron was simply checking whether you mistook him for someone else back at the Seahorse Tavern, or were actually hunting him. Now it's clear, so he's sending you this badge and the following message, quote: 'I never bothered you, but if you want war, you'll get one. Since seven dead bodies isn't enough for you, I'll hunt your people throughout Umbar, and you'll find out what a lone master can do to a bunch of fat bums.' But these are your affairs, I don't care about them. We have our own business."

"What business?" It looked like Marandil did not care any more. Even his musclemen, watching from a table in another corner, could see that the boss was in bad shape.

"Very simple. If Tangorn failed to meet me, that's one thing. Whereas if he did but you guys messed up and didn't twig who the gondolier was—that's quite another. Dunno about your head, but you'll lose your officer's cords for sure. I'm gonna have to write my report about the meeting now, since Tangorn's letter arrived at our station by regular mail and was duly logged . . . Stop this crap! Signal your gorillas to sit down—I'm not alone here, either! You think offing me will save you? Good . . . yes, like that . . . sit down quietly. What's with this northern habit of grabbing by force what you can buy? It doesn't matter any for my report who the gondolier was . . . Well? Say something!"

"I don't understand."

"Man, this screw-up must've struck you dumb. It's a simple deal—five dungans, and there was no gondolier. I mean, of course there was one, but he wasn't Tangorn. Whaddya think—is your captain's badge worth five dungans?"

By the time Vaddari got back to his inhospitable bachelor pad, he had had enough time to consider Tangorn's offer. Of course, it was not to dispatch three Gondorian operatives and officially declare war on Marandil that the baron risked everything today. His real objective, strange as it may seem, was simply to meet Vaddari to offer him a certain delicate assignment. The job was to be fairly simple (although on a tight schedule—only a week) but extremely dangerous—a single misstep would land the inspector straight in the basement of 12 Shore Street, a place that would forever stink with blood, burnt flesh, and

vomit. The baron was willing to part with a hundred fifty dungans for success, an inspector's salary for twelve years of impeccable service. Vaddari weighed the risk and decided that it was worth it; he was no coward and always finished the job he started.

"Dear Yakudze, your expression suggests that congratulations are in order."

"It was even easier than I expected—he broke immediately. 'If we let Minas Tirith know about the escaped gondolier, it will demonstrate that you had Tangorn twice and twice let him escape. No counter-intelligence professional will believe in such a coincidence. The way it will look to them is that you're working together with the baron and even had seven subordinates killed in cold blood covering for him. They'll send you to the basement, wring a confession to working for Emyn Arnen out of you, and liquidate you.' This logic seemed flawless to him and he signed the agency agreement. Please tell Makarioni to speed up the work in Barangar—the Gondorian spy station is now deaf and blind . . . Do you know what he wanted as his fee? It turns out that there's another team working in Umbar now, reporting directly to Minas Tirith . . ."

"Ah so."

"Fortunately, those guys aren't interested in Barangar. Rather, they're hunting Tangorn for some reason and have barred the locals from doing so. Their commander is a certain lieutenant nicknamed Mongoose, who carries a  mandate and is a professional of the highest caliber, according to Marandil."

"Very interesting."

"Marandil had violated his direct order to forget about Tangorn and may be arrested once the lieutenant finds out. The captain wants us to get rid of this Mongoose and his men, just in case. I find this request to be reasonable: we have to protect this scoundrel like the apple of our eye now, at least until Operation Sirocco. In other words, chief, you'll have to ask for the Prosecutor General's sanction. Our dearest Almaran is big on law and order and always makes a major stink over liquidations, but he'll have to go along with us here."

"Aren't you afraid that he'll ask you the following question: how long will a man who authorized the killing of a Gondorian intelligence officer live, and what kind of death might befall him?"

“Almaran is a fussy shyster, but he’s no coward. Do you remember the Arreno affair, when he blew off both the threats and the pleas of two senators and sent three *zamorro* bosses to the gallows? In Mongoose’s case everything is crystal clear: he’s here illegally on false papers and is setting up a kidnapping and a murder. We shouldn’t have any problem.”

“No problem on that end, true. The real problem is finding these guys.”

“Oh, we’ll find them!” the Vice-Director of Operations responded somewhat flippantly. “We’re still masters of this city. We’ll find Tangorn in a day or two and use him as bait to catch those hunting him.”

“We’ll see.”

That last comment proved prophetic. DSD operatives scoured Umbar from stem to stern, but did not find either Tangorn or Mongoose; both lieutenants seemed to have vanished into thin air. By the fourth day of the search it became clear that neither wanted man was still in town; most likely the baron’s body was at the bottom of a canal while Mongoose must have already disembarked in Pelargir to report mission accomplished. Well, good riddance, then—Marandil is out of danger, so why get involved in Gondor-Ithilien squabbles?

Most interestingly, the Umbar Secret Service’s conclusion that Tangorn was no longer in the city was absolutely correct. By that time the baron was long aboard a felucca named *Flying Fish* which he had chartered to lie adrift about ten miles off Cape Jurinjoy south of Umbar, away from the main sea lanes. The three smugglers crewing the felucca (one Uncle Sarrakesh and two of his ‘nephews’) found this pastime strange but kept this opinion to themselves, rightly believing that a man who paid half-a-hundred dungans for a three-week charter was entitled not to be bothered with questions or advice. Even if they had unwittingly blundered into some grandiose affair like the last year’s raid on the Republic Treasury’s gold transport ship, their pay was worth that risk; actually, the passenger did not look like a criminal, even though he came recommended by Lame Vittano himself (the man who was jokingly called ‘the Prince of Kharmian’ behind his back). The previous night of the twelfth the crew finally had a chance to demonstrate their skill to their employer—the *Flying Fish* slipped into the maze of skerries framing the western side of the Kharmian Bay right under the noses of the swift coast guard galleys. After the customary exchange of signals in an inconspicuous cove they took on

the baron's mail and then retreated back beyond Jurinjoy.

One letter was from Vaddari. The inspector reported success: he had found out the addresses of two Gondorian safe houses and assembled complete information on their keepers and warning signals. The other inquiry came up empty (as Tangorn had expected): all persons having anything to do with Aragorn's ships had either died from sudden illnesses or accidents, or else have completely lost all memory of the affair, while all the relevant documents in the harbor office, going back years, turned out to have been doctored (without any visible signs of an alteration); it looked like a whole bunch of Umbarian ships have never existed. There was more: the two senators Vaddari had felt out on the subject insisted that while they themselves could not remember the details of the Senate session which held the vote to support Gondor in the War of the Ring, such details could surely be found in the Senate minutes of February 29th; the honorable legislators treated all attempts to remind them that this year was not a leap one as a bad joke. The whole business reeked of some ominous witchery, so Tangorn wholeheartedly approved of Vaddari's decision to avoid drawing any further attention to his interest in the ship affair, lest another fatal accident befall him.

This made the second letter even more valuable. It contained information gathered by Alviss and relayed through Vaddari and further through Vittano's men. She had talked to her numerous friends in the arts and business circles on a topic innocuous enough not to alarm any of the spooks likely to keep tabs on her these days, whether from DSD or 12 Shore Street. As usual, the most important information was lying openly in plain sight, and it painted a most interesting picture.

About three years ago, as the war was heating up in the North, a fad for all things Elvish swept the Umbarian youth. The simpler ones made do with Elvish music and symbols, whereas the more sophisticated were offered a comprehensive ideology. In Alviss' telling, at least, this ideology was a screwball concoction of the teachings of Khandian dervishes ("own nothing, fear nothing, want nothing") and Mordorian anarchists (reorganization of society on the basis of absolute personal freedom and social equality), seasoned with bucolic claptrap about "all-encompassing unity with Nature." One could only wonder why the young Umbarian intellectuals went for such primitive drivel, but they did, big time. Moreover, it soon transpired that not sharing those views was unseemly and even

dangerous: all persons who had the ill grace of expressing anything other than admiration and support for them were ostracized and persecuted—"children are always cruel."

A year later it was all over as suddenly as it began. All that remained of the movement (and it was, beyond doubt, an organized movement) was the Elfinar school of painting—a rather interesting version of primitivism—and a dozen crazy gurus ecstatically preaching the impending conversion of the entire Middle Earth into Enchanted Forests; however, their main activities were denouncing each other and screwing their stoned underage followers. The serious young people have dropped all these games completely and returned to the bosom of their families, from which they had been totally estranged over the course of the previous year. Their explanations did not vary much—from "devils made me do it" to "whoever is not a revolutionary when young has no heart; whoever is not a conservative when old has no brain"—but what parents care for elaborate explanations when they have their dear child back at the family table?

All of the above could have been written off as nonsense that deserved no special attention (youth fads are legion) if not for a peculiar circumstance—all of the 'returnees,' including the offspring of the most prominent families of the Republic, have suddenly acquired an unusual penchant for government service, which was something previously unheard of among the elite youth. A transformation of a semi-bohemian dreamer or society playboy into a model public official looks weird in general; when such cases number in the dozens and hundreds, they make a disturbing pattern. Add to that the fact that all these youngsters have made brilliant careers in the past two years (while exhibiting an amazing degree of unity and mutual assistance, better than any *zamorro*), advancing quite far up the administrative ladder, and the picture turned really scary. There was no doubt that in seven or eight years precisely those boys would hold all key government positions—from the Foreign Ministry to the Admiralty and from the Treasury to the Secret Service—and then they will have acquired all the levers of real power in the Republic without firing a shot. The most fantastic part was that no one in Umbar seemed to care about it, other than some ancient minor bureaucrats mumbling sentimentally: "We really shouldn't chastise our young men! Look at them working for the good of the Motherland!"

Tangorn put down Alviss' list of about three dozen 'returnees' and was now watching a seagull trailing the *Flying Fish*, deep in thought. The bird hung motionless in the windy blue expanse, resembling a checkmark in a margin—the checkmark that he should now make next to the name of his target. The problem was not the difficulty of this particular choice; the sad part was that he felt a genuine affinity to these boys and girls, based on what little he knew about them. Money-shunning idealists whose honesty could compare only to their naiveté . . . Unfortunately, he had no chance to explain to them that the real Lórien (rather than the one created by their youthful imaginations) had not a trace of either freedom or classless equality, as far as he could tell, or that the 'corrupt rotten pseudo-democracy' that had reared them to its woe nevertheless had certain advantages over theocratic dictatorship.

So: he is looking for the most likeable and maybe even kindred-spirited people in Umbar.

He is looking for them in order to kill them.

What was that Haladdin used to say? "Do the ends justify the means? Stated generally, the problem lacks a solution."

CHAPTER 45

Umbar, Lamp Street

Night of June 14, 3019

The Umbarians all say that whoever has not seen the Big Carnival has not seen anything worthwhile in his life. Arrogant as it sounds, there are solid grounds for saying so. It is not the beauty of the fireworks and costumed processions, although they are magnificent. The most important part is that on the second Sunday of June all societal barriers crumble into dust: streetwalkers turn into highborn damsels and the damsels turn into streetwalkers, while a couple of comedians performing a skit making fun of famously slow-witted inhabitants of the Peninsula may turn out to be a senator and a member of the paupers' guild. It is a day when time runs backward and everyone can reclaim their wonderfully reckless youth, like the warm gentle lips of some girl in a black mask you just stole from her previous partner; it is a day when profiting is sinful and stealing is just déclassé. On that day everyone is allowed to do anything except breach another's incognito . . .

In that sense the actions of two noble sirs who had fallen behind a bead-strung firecracker-popping procession making its way down Lamp Street at the Mint Alley intersection should be termed improper, although said actions were apparently well-intentioned. Those two persons—one in a multicolored bodysuit of a circus gymnast, another decked out in jester's bells—were bending over a third one, in a blue-and-gold stargazer's cloak, who was prostrated on the ground. Not too skillfully trying to revive him ("Hey, man, wake up!"), they have removed his silvery mask; it was plain that the would-be rescuers themselves were barely on their feet.

A chirping flock of three girls in assorted dominos emerged from the alley straight onto the scene. “Partners, partners!” they chorused, clapping, “and just the right number! The gymnast is mine! Come along, pretty boy!”

“Easy, sisters, easy!” the gymnast responded. “See, our third friend is kinda out of it . . .”

“Oh, poor kid! Drink too much?”

“Dunno. Just been dancing his feet off in the procession and then suddenly whoa! and he’s down. Not as if he’s been drinking much . . .”

“Maybe I can bring him back to life with a kiss?” the blue domino purred coquettishly.

The jester grinned: “Go ahead, baby—maybe he’ll throw up, it’d help for sure!”

“Yuck! Jerk . . .” the girl was offended.

“There, my beauties, don’t get all upset, all right?” the gymnast said amiably, hugging the purple domino a bit below the waist with a steady arm (rewarded with an immediate sultry

“Ah, the cheek!”). “You’re all total hits, we love you all to death and all that. Got any wine?.. Too bad. Here’s what we’ll do: you take the Mint to the seashore, buy enough Núrnen for all of us,” with those words he handed the girl a small pouch full of small silver coins, “and, most importantly, stake out some seats close to the musicians. We’ll catch up with you in a few minutes, as soon as we drag this character to that lawn over there, let him sleep it off on the grass . . . Imagine being saddled with this on Carnival!..”

When the girls disappeared in the alley, their heels clicking loudly on the flagstones, the jester let out his breath and shook his head, as if disbelieving his luck: “Phew! I thought that was it and we’d have to off them . . .”

“Yeah, I know you like swift and drastic solutions,” grumbled the gymnast, “that’s why I have to watch you like a hawk. Did you stop to think of how we’d get rid of three bodies here, eh?”

“No idea,” the other admitted honestly. “So what now, chief—are we all right?”

“Not sure, so—no wet work, but following up on them is necessary. Who the hell knows who these girls are, though they don’t look like cover. Track them to the shore and double back immediately if anything is amiss.”

“What about you, all by yourself?”

“*Mantzenilla* is good stuff, the guy won’t come around for at least an

hour. Here, help me pick him up," the gymnast crouched by the still stargazer, "I'll manage the hundred yards to our door somehow."

. . . The stargazer's surfacing from his drugged stupor was slow and labored, but the moment he stirred he got his nostrils pinched and a draught of cola-based stimulant poured down his throat—time was short, the interrogation could not wait. He coughed and hacked (some of the burning liquid went down the wrong pipe) and opened his eyes. The first glance told him clearly enough the predicament he was in: a windowless room (but still more likely a ground floor than a basement), two men wearing carnival outfits of a gymnast and a jester; wait, wait . . . yes, these two had danced in the same procession with him, and then—right!—the gymnast gave him some wine to drink from a glass flask with merry eastern dragons on its sides. And an excellent wine it was, except two draughts knocked him out to then find himself who knows where with his arms securely tied to an armchair, with a nausea-inducing array of tools in a large tin bowl on a stool in front of him. A cold hand seemed to grab his guts at a mere look at them. How's this possible—he remembers the gymnast drinking from the same flask? An antidote? Actually, who cares, the most important part is who these guys are—the Department or 12 Shore Street? He looked away, at the fire-lit masked face of the jester, who was busily stirring the coals in a large floor censer, and shuddered almost violently enough to spasm his back muscles.

The gymnast broke the silence: "Mister Algali, Junior Secretary of the Foreign Ministry, if I'm not mistaken?" He was sitting a bit away, attentively looking at the prisoner.

"You're not mistaken. To whom do I have the honor of speaking?" The Junior Secretary had gathered his wits and displayed only surprise with no outward sign of fear.

"My name will mean nothing to you. I represent the Secret Guard of the Reunited Kingdom and hope to work with you. The set-up here is not as diverse as the one at 12 Shore Street, of course, but the basement is almost as good."

"Your recruiting methods are rather strange." Algali shrugged, and something akin to relief showed in his face. "You should realize already that it's much easier to buy than to rob here, in the South. You want me for your network? Sure! Why stage this stupid show?"

"The show was not as stupid as it might seem. The thing is, what we need is not the Khand-related information that you have access to at work, but something very different."

The Junior Secretary raised a questioning eyebrow: “I don’t understand.”

“Quit mucking around—you’ve already understood everything, unless you’re an idiot. We need the Elvish network of which you’re a part—names, safe houses, passwords. Well?”

“Elvish network? Have you guys sniffed too much *kokkaine*?” Algali grunted nonchalantly—too nonchalantly, given the situation.

“Now listen to me, and listen carefully. I’d much rather not have to use any of this,” the gymnast gestured towards the bowl and the censer, “but there are only two options here.

Option one: you tell us everything you know, then go home and keep working with us.

Option two is you tell us everything you know with our help,” another nod at the center, “but then you won’t leave here. You can imagine how you’ll look afterwards, so why traumatize your Elvish friends? I like option one better; how about you?”

“So do I, but I have nothing to tell you either way. You’ve made a mistake, I’m not the person you want.”

“Is that your last word? I mean—the last before we begin?”

“Yes. It’s a mistake, I’ve never heard of any Elvish network.”

“You just blew it, buddy!” the gymnast chortled in satisfaction. “See, were you a regular Umbarian official, you’d either be having hysterics now or inventing this network out of your head on the spot. We’d be catching your inconsistencies, you’d then be lying anew . . . but you aren’t even trying to buy time. So even if I had any doubts about you before, I don’t know. Got any objections?”

Algali was silent—there was nothing to say and no need to say anything. Most importantly, a strange tranquility descended on him. The Power of which he was a part came to his rescue; he felt its presence almost physically as a touch of a mother’s warm hands: “Please endure it, son! It won’t be too terrible and you have to endure it for only a short time. Don’t be afraid, for I am here with you!” Amazingly, the gymnast detected the invisible presence of this Power, too: one glance at Algali’s serene smile was enough for him to understand that the damn kid has just slipped through his fingers. Once beyond his power, he could do anything to him now—the prisoner will die without saying a word. This happens rarely, but it does happen. Then he simply punched the man tied to the armchair in the face, putting all his fury into the blow: “Son of a bitch, Elvish whore!” thereby acknowledging his defeat.

“An Elvish whore? How interesting!”

Nobody had noticed when a fourth man, this one dressed like a *mashtang* bandit, slipped through the door. The *mashtang*’s sword, however, was definitely not of costume quality; an application of its hilt to the gymnast’s skull immediately put the latter out of commission.

The jester had the time to back away and get his blade out, but this did not help him: he was hopelessly outclassed as a fencer, so in less than ten seconds the guest cut open the host’s chest with a long diagonal lunge, splattering blood in all directions, including on the stargazer. After carefully wiping the sword with a rag he picked up from the floor, the *mashtang* gazed at the prisoner with gloomy surprise:

“As I understand it, fair sir, these guys were trying to implicate you as belonging to the Elvish underground. Is that so?”

CHAPTER 46

"I don't understand." Algali's diction left much to be desired; he was feeling his teeth with his tongue, trying to assess the damage.

"Damn it, young man, I'm not enough of an idiot to ask you whether you're part of an underground! I'm asking—what did the men from Aragorn's Secret Guard want with you?"

Algali was silently trying to assess the situation. The whole thing reeked of a badly staged play, complete with the valiant white-clad rescuer arriving out of a chimney at the precise moment when the princess is already in the hands of the hairy bandit chief but somehow has not yet been deflowered. At least, it would appear this way if not for a couple of things: the sword with which the *mashtang* has already cut his bonds was real, and so had the thrust to the jester's chest been (judging by the sound), and the blood Algali wiped from his right cheek was real blood rather than cranberry juice. It did look like he got mixed up into someone else's spat; in any case, it won't get any worse than it already is.

"By the way, I am Baron Tangorn. What's your name, fair youngster?"

"Algali, Junior Secretary of the Foreign Ministry, at your service."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance. Let's analyze this situation. My sudden appearance in this house has to look staged—such coincidences happen only in books—so I look a very suspicious character to you . . ."

"Why, Baron, I'm extremely grateful to you," Algali bowed with exaggerated ceremoniousness. "Were it not for your intervention, my end would've been tragic, indeed.

Would you believe that these people have decided that I belong to some kind of an Elvish organization . . ."

"Now let's look at this from my vantage point. Forgive me, but I'll assume that my Gondorian 'colleagues' were not mistaken . . . Don't interrupt me!" There was a commanding clang of metal in the

mashtang's voice. "So: I have come to Umbar from Ithilien on a special mission to establish contact with the Elves and convey certain vital information to them—for a price, of course. Unfortunately, Aragorn has learned about my mission and is trying to prevent the transfer of this information, since for him it's also a matter of life and death. His Secret Guard is hunting me. Three days ago they tried to arrest me at the Seahorse Tavern, and we've been playing cat-and-mouse all around the city ever since. The mouse has turned out to be a scorpion, so these games have so far cost them seven dead—eight, including this one." He nodded nonchalantly towards the jester.

"Anyway, tonight I finally discovered one of their hideouts—4 Lamp Street—and naturally decided to pay them a visit. What do I find? I find the Secret Guardsmen interrogating—so attentively as to neglect guarding the place—a man whom they believe to belong to the very same Elvish network I've been trying to locate for the last two weeks without success. So which of the two coincidences looks more suspicious to you?"

"Well, speaking theoretically . . ."

"Of course, purely theoretically—we have agreed to stipulate your membership in the Elvish network only for the purposes of this discussion. In any event, I'm inclined to believe your story; to be honest, I have no options. First, you need to hide . . ."

"No way! All these spy games of yours . . ."

"Are you a complete idiot? Once you're on the list at 12 Shore Street, that's it—you're doomed. You will only prove your non-membership in the Elvish network by dying under torture, whereupon they'll shrug and apologize for their mistake—maybe. So even if you know nothing of this, you have to find some hidey-hole; and I'm not about to understand your problems and offer you one of mine, mind you. Whereas if you're indeed from the Elvish underground, then this miraculous rescue means that you have a long and elaborate debriefing by your own security service—or whatever you call it—to look forward to. In that case, you'll simply relate all you've witnessed so far and tell them the following: Baron Tangorn from Ithilien is seeking to contact Elandar."

"I've never heard this name."

"You couldn't possibly have, not at your level of clearance. So: if your commanders decide that this merits their attention, I'll be waiting for you at seven on Friday evenings at the Green Mackerel restaurant. Make sure to tell them that I won't deal with anyone but

Elandar himself: I'm not interested in flunkies."

After leading the stargazer out on the porch, into the night streaked with fireworks flashes, the *mashtang* halted his protégé: "Wait up. First, remember this house, the address, and all that—trust me, you'll need it. Second, once I find out from this gymnast why 12 Shore Street decided to target Algali, Junior Secretary of the Foreign Ministry, I'll put his written testimony into a letter that I'll leave for you at Mama Madino's establishment in the Kharmian Village. All right, lad, go now. I'm going back to talk to our mutual friend while the coals are still hot in that censer."

It did not look like the Junior Secretary took the *mashtang*'s warning to heart. He wandered the night streets for a while (probably and laughably looking for a tail), and then went into the Shooting Star bar, the favorite haunt of the art and bohemian crowds; the place was always crowded and now, on Carnival night, positively packed. Here, in the light, one could see that Algali did not escape unscathed: his hands shook visibly. Waiting for the bartender to mix him a Forget-me-not—a complex cocktail of eleven ingredients—he kept mechanically stacking a few coins, but his disobedient fingers kept knocking the stack over.

The bartender looked at this exercise, grunted and put the cocktail aside: "Lemme pour you some rum, buddy, it'll do you right . . ." He spent a couple of morose hours in a corner talking to no one, then suddenly ordered another cocktail, after which he left the bar, took some back alleys to the Bridge of Wishes-Coming-True, totally deserted at this predawn hour, and disappeared.

Had someone been watching Algali then, he would for sure have referred to supernatural forces: the man simply vanished. Theoretically one could posit a jump into a gondola passing under the bridge, but the suspended span of the Bridge of Wishes-Coming-True is thirty feet above water; a Foreign Ministry clerk is likely incapable of such acrobatic tricks, plus the feat would require precise synchronization. At any rate, all other explanations would be no less fantastic. Of course, one could simply say meaningfully: "Elvish magic!" but those words do not explain anything; in other words, how Algali made it to a plain fisherman cabin on the shore of Barangar Bay remained a mystery.

Two hours later he stood naked in the middle of the cabin, eyes closed and arms outstretched. A slight black-haired girl who somehow resembled a sad *vivino*[65] bird was slowly moving her palms along

Algali's back a hair away from it. Having examined his entire body in this manner, she shook her head negatively: "He's clean. No magic dust."

"Thank you, baby!" The man who sat in the corner on an dried-out barrel had a firm, calm face of a captain on a storm-shaken bridge. "Are you tired?"

"Not very." She tried to smile, but the smile came out wan.

"Rest an hour or so."

"I'm not tired, honest!"

"Go rest. That's an order. Then check his clothes once again, thread by thread—I'm still concerned that they may have planted a beacon on him." He turned to a young man in a bat costume: "What's your story?"

"Counter-surveillance detected no tail, at least from the Shooting Star to the bridge. I followed him, since anyway I had to remove the rope ladder he used to go down to the gondola, and it was all clear."

"Any problems?"

"None. We alerted a cover team the moment we got the danger signal—the Forget-me-not plus the tumbling coins. Over the second cocktail the bartender told him which post had the ladder, and it all went down flawlessly."

"All right, you're all dismissed for now. Algali, put something on and tell your story. You have my complete attention."

With one last glance at the back of the Junior Secretary receding down Lamp Street, the man who called himself Baron Tangorn (it was him, in fact) returned to the first floor of the house. Work there was in full swing: the gymnast and the jester, both alive and well, were busy cleaning up the room. The jester was already out of his bloodied clothes (the baron's sword had pierced a bladder filled with pig blood and hidden on his chest) and was now taking off the *mithril* mail, grimacing with pain. Seeing Tangorn, he turned to show him his side, which sported a large purple bruise:

"Look what you done, boss! Betcha you broke my rib!"

"The dungans you got cover pain and suffering. If you're angling for a bonus, forget it."

"Really, man—whyn't you just stab me, careful-like? Why lay it on for real? What if that mail shirt of yours broke?"

"Well, it didn't," the baron responded matter-of-factly. "By the way,

hand it over."

He had painted the mail with black enamel, so that it looked exactly like ancient Mordorian armor—he had no desire to demonstrate *mithril* to his partners.

He turned to the gymnast, who was carefully wiping blood splatters off the armchair.

"Inspector! Don't forget to put the censer back where it was."

"Listen, Baron," the other responded irritably, "don't teach me how to clean up a scene!"

Then he recited a couple of well-known saws about an impudent son giving his father sex advice and about the main reason for not making love on the Three Stars Embankment being the passerby who would drive you nuts with their advice. Tangorn had to admit that the man had a point.

"Where did you get all this?" Tangorn fingered one of the ominous-looking pullers he fished randomly from the tin bowl.

"Just bought all his tools off a market dentist for three castamir *s*, plus added some handyman's tools. Add a little dried blood and it all looks very presentable, if you don't look too close."

"Very well, guys, thank you for your service." With those words he handed Vaddari and his henchman a bag of gold apiece. "Will ten minutes be enough for you to finish cleaning up?"

The inspector thought about it, then nodded. "Excellent. Your ship," the baron turned to the jester, "sails with the dawn. In those lands fifty dungans is quite enough to set up a tavern or an inn and forever forget Umbar and its policemen. My advice is not to publish any memoirs of this night, though."

"What's 'publishing memoirs,' eh, boss?"

"That's when someone gets drunk and starts telling stories. Or gets too smart and sends a letter to police."

"Whatcha saying, boss? I never rat on my pardners!" The man was upset.

"Keep it up, then. Mind that Lame Vittano owes me a few and considers himself my brother, so if anything goes wrong, he'll find you even in the Far West, never mind Vendotenia."

"You dissing me, boss?"

"I'm not 'dissing,' I'm warning. Sometimes, you know, people want to get paid twice for the same job. All right, guys, farewell and hope we never meet again."

With those words the baron walked out, hesitating at the door for a

few seconds: the job awaiting him on the second floor required more than just guts.

CHAPTER 47

The thing was that the house at 4 Lamp Street was indeed a Gondorian safe house, but its true owners—two Secret Guard sergeants—have taken no part in the above events, having spent all that time bound and gagged in the living room upstairs. The sergeants were captured in a lightning-fast operation devised by Vaddari and Tangorn and carried out with the help of a robber nicknamed Knuckles, who needed to change climate soon. The baron needed a third partner not only for the latter's skills, but also to make the number of Algali's abductors match the true number of the house's residents. Since one of the kidnappers has been 'killed' by Tangorn as part of the hoax, one of the sergeants had to die by the sword now. Truly, the World is Text, and there's no getting away from that, thought the baron as he opened the door to the living room.

"Do you recognize me, boys?" Tangorn took off his mask, so the prisoners had a good chance to compare his visage to the search descriptions while he was getting their gags out.

One shrank back and the other went stone-faced; it was clear that they recognized him and expected nothing nice. "Shall we talk first or do I just dice you up?"

The one who had shrunk back erupted in a volley of disjointed curses, obviously trying desperately to push back fear. The other, though, seemed like a tough nut: he gazed at Tangorn levelly, and then spat: "Do what you need to do, rascal! But remember that we'll catch up with you one day, and then we'll hang you by the feet, as befits a traitor!"

"Yes, most likely that's how it's going to be, at some point," the baron shrugged, unsheathing his sword (the choice of victim was clear now), "but you won't be there to see it, I guarantee that."

With those words he stabbed the prisoner in the chest and pulled the blade out immediately; the blood gush was spectacular. Over the last few years the third sword of Gondor had killed lots of people in

battle, but never before did he have to dispatch an unarmed helpless man, albeit a mortal enemy, in cold blood; he understood clearly that he was taking another step beyond the pale, but there was no choice. The only break he allowed himself was to stab precisely in the upper right chest; such a wound is not always fatal, so if the guy was one of Fortune's favorites, he could possibly make it. The baron did not need a corpse *per se*, but the wound had to be real, lest the Elves later suspect the whole thing to be a show.

When he turned to the other sergeant, bloody sword in hand, the man tried to push himself off with bound feet and, as Knuckles would say, spilled his guts like a hoisted pig.

Swapping the variables does work sometimes . . . Tangorn had to interrupt his revelations, since he was not very interested in all the goings-on at 12 Shore Street.

"Fine. When did your station start investigating the Elvish underground?"

"I haven't heard anything about that. Maybe others . . ."

"What do you mean, you haven't heard? Why did you kidnap an Elf, then?"

"What Elf?" The man was perplexed.

"All right, not an Elf—the guy from the Elvish underground that I just let out of your basement."

"I . . . I don't understand! We never heard about any Elves!"

"Ah, so I must be hallucinating!" Tangorn smiled ominously. "Or maybe someone planted him in your basement, eh?"

"Listen, I told you all I know; if Marandil gets his hands on me, I'm finished. Why would I lie?"

"Enough of this crap! I'll have you know that I've located this house of yours by following that guy from the Elvish underground—Algali, Junior Secretary of the Foreign Ministry.

And I saw with my own eyes how two costumed guys first gave him some potion and then dragged him into this mansion of yours. So I decided to pay you a visit . . . Unless there's two more of your people somewhere around here?"

"No, I swear by anything, no! We haven't kidnapped anybody!" The sergeant's eyes looked crazy, with good reason.

"Well, well, looks like I've finally found something worthwhile in the pile of scraps you're trying to feed me. Looks like this is your main operation and you're ready to sacrifice anything to cover it up . . . except now I'm really interested, so don't expect to die as quickly and

easily as your buddy here! Know what I'm going to do to you first?"

The sergeant was one of those people who think much better when they are scared. To avoid the nightmare the baron had promised he instantaneously invented his own version of events: they had Marandil's undocumented oral order to capture Algali, Junior Secretary of the Foreign Ministry. Tangorn pointed out some inconsistencies, the man immediately made corrections to his tale, and this back-and-forth went on until the story became logically consistent and sounded true. In reality, baron's deft leading questions simply prompted the sergeant to put together the legend he himself had developed in the past few days.

After the sergeant had committed the legend to paper, twice, Tangorn renewed his bonds, took both sergeant's badges (the talkative one was Aravan, the tough one was Morimir; the baron checked the latter's carotid artery while removing the chain from around his neck and found a pulse), and left the house to his involuntary interlocutor's frenzied cries: "Untie me!

Let me go!" By Tangorn's design, the later the man fell into his friends' hands at 12 Shore Street, the better; the baron took care to find a policeman (not an easy task on Carnival night) and let him know that the door to 4 Lamp Street was open slightly and someone was calling for help inside: "Doesn't sound like a joke—perhaps some drunk is misbehaving?"

Then he put Aravan's testimony and badge into the letter destined for Kharmian Village.

The other copy he addressed to the ambassador of the Reunited Kingdom: let him and Marandil try and puzzle it all out. Bafflement breeds inaction, as is well known.

Tangorn made it back to the *Flying Fish* by dawn and fell asleep like a log. The deed was done and all he had to do was wait: the lure he had dropped—the real name of one of the underground leaders—was too good to be passed up. The Elves couldn't ignore the meeting; at the very least they'd show up to kill him. Their checking will probably take a few days, so he should only go to the Green Mackerel next Friday, the twentieth. Now he had enough time to plan both the talk with Elandar and the cover and escape routes.

". . . He will only talk to Elandar himself, as he's not interested in flunkies."

“You are mad!” The gaze of the Great Magister was terrible. “He can’t possibly know this name, nor can anyone outside Lórien!”

“Nevertheless, that’s what he said, milord. Should we contact him?”

“Definitely, but I will do it myself—this is too important. Either he really does have some important information, in which case we need to get it, or he is provoking us and we must liquidate him before it’s too late. How long will it take your security service to verify this weird miraculous rescue story?”

“I believe that four days will be sufficient, milord. You should be able to visit the Green Mackerel this Friday.”

“One more thing. This Algali . . . he has heard a name he has no business knowing. Make sure that he never tells it to anyone.”

“Yes, milord.” The chief of security looked away momentarily. “If you think it’s necessary . . .”

“I do think so. The kid has been compromised: both the Secret Guard and DSD will be hunting him now. We have no right to endanger the entire underground. Yes, I know what you’ve just thought: had it been an Elf, I’d behave differently, right?”

“No, milord,” the other replied woodenly. “The safety of the Organization is paramount, that’s basic. I only wish to remind you that it is Algali who is supposed to meet Tangorn and also to pick up the letter in Kharmian Village, so we’ll have to wait until Friday to do it . . .”

Yes, thought the Great Magister with fleeting pride, we have really trained them well, and in just two years. The magic phrase ‘it’s necessary’ accomplishes everything[66]. Who would’ve thought that all those liberal humanists will be so eager to stand at attention and salute, and find a deep sacred meaning in doing so, one that’s beyond their weak civilian minds . . .

Actually, this Algali is lucky, if you think about it. They are all dead men anyway, but he will at least die happy, full of illusions and believing in a glorious future, whereas the others will have to behold what they’ve done and realize whose road they’ve paved before they die . . .

“Barrel of pus!! Can’t blame those Gondorian idiots, but where the hell were you, Jacuzzi?”

It was not often that the Vice-Director of Operations saw his superior in such a state. The report of Tangorn’s night raid on 4 Lamp

Street brought him to a boiling point, nor did the news from Minas Tirith brought over by Dimitriadis (Vice-Director of Political Intelligence) do anything to improve his mood.

"Do you at least realize that this psycho and his vendetta will bury Marandil in a day or two, together with Operation Sirocco?"

"I'm afraid Tangorn's no psycho, nor is this a vendetta; we're just unable to figure out his plan. Amazing, but this amateur keeps winning round after round! It's enough to make one believe that he's being assisted by Higher Powers . . ."

"All right, enough mysticism. How's our captain doing?"

"If the baron intended to break him, he has fully succeeded. Aravan's written testimony just about finished the poor guy off: he swears that he gave no such order and that all this is news to him. This is like delirious ravings . . . Perhaps that *elfinar* will clear things up some once we find him."

"Leave Algali alone!" Almandin snapped. "He's got nothing to do with making your agent Marandil safe. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!" the operative answered, looking down gloomily.

Once again he hit the same wall. When two years ago he put his first report on the pro-Elvish organizations in Umbar on the Director's desk, he was ordered to immediately halt all work in that direction and deactivate already planted agents. Ever since then he regularly came across traces of those secret societies, like mouse droppings in an old cupboard, yet every time he was told not to stick his fink's snout into high politics: "This is Dimitriadis's job." It seemed plausible that the Vice-Director of Political Intelligence was simultaneously being told "This is Jacuzzi's job," but this guess was quite impossible to verify: private consultations between Vice-Directors (as well as any such contacts between employees outside of their chain of command) were strictly forbidden by the Department's rules and were punished as deviations from *umberto*. Very well, he decided at some point with relief that surprised him, Almandin must have his reasons that I can't see from my vantage point—perhaps a secret alliance with the Elves against Gondor or something like that. After all, I did my job as a detective, now it's let the bosses and analytics think. What was it that the unforgettable Tin Man used to say? "The cock's job is to crow, not to summon the dawn."

"Jacuzzi, do you think that the captain can keep working?"

"He's totally demoralized right now; he whines and begs to be allowed to flee immediately, as per agreement."

“Exactly!” In annoyance, the Director slapped the morning report from Carnero’s headquarters. “It’s getting harder and harder for Marandil to cover up the goings-on in Barangar Bay. His underlings aren’t blind . . .” Underlings aren’t blind—is that a hint at me and the Elves? Jacuzzi hastily banished the thought. “Add to that a string of spectacular failures and a pile of dead bodies, thanks to that buccaneer from Ithilien. Soon our captain will be stripped of his officer’s cords and court-martialed. Long story short: find Tangorn immediately and isolate him at all costs! All costs, you hear? If you can do it without bloodshed—be my guest, but if not, then just liquidate him and be done with it!.. Now, about the Gondorian station. If needs be, can we simply block their communications with the continent, and extend that blockade throughout mid-July, when Sirocco is scheduled to begin?”

“I think so. We will cut off the land routes via Chevelgar while Makarioni will contact the Coast Guard and put them on high alert.”

“Good. Now: since Tangorn is in town, then Mongoose should be, too. Got any news on that front?”

“Kind of . . . We have a very faint lead. For the past few days my people have been watching Tangorn’s girlfriend Alviss and have discovered a strange detail, seemingly a trifle . . .”

. . . Even the most banal measures, like placing the guards on high alert, can sometimes yield unexpected results. While looking through prior day’s reports on the morning of the 20th, Jacuzzi came across a Coast Guard report: on the night of the 19th they have intercepted the *Flying Fish*, the felucca of a well-known smuggler Uncle Sarrakesh, in an attempt to enter Kharmian Bay. There were two crewmembers on board beside the skipper. The felucca’s hold was empty, giving the authorities no excuse to impound the vessel; Uncle Sarrakesh will have to be let go by the evening. The report mentioned, however, that the *Flying Fish* was attempting to evade the coast guard galley by hugging the reef-strewn shore of the Peninsula; it is possible, the guards concluded, that there may have been a passenger on the felucca that had escaped by swimming ashore in the dark.

It is hard to say what attracted the DSD Vice-Director’s attention to this banal harbor story; perhaps some faint premonition. As far as he remembered, Uncle Sarrakesh was connected to Lame Vittano’s *zamorro* and specialized in smuggling proscribed steel weaponry to Harad in exchange for cola nuts whose import was the Republic’s monopoly. Cola was very expensive stuff, so the return shipments

were typically small (no more than ten grain sacks) and it was a task of two or three minutes to heave them overboard in case of trouble, so the emptiness of the *Flying Fish*'s hold did not surprise the Vice-Director. The strange thing was that the guardsmen's specially trained dog had not detected any cola smell on board, which prompted him to give his full attention to the idea that the felucca's only cargo had been an unknown passenger. At any other time this would have been a trifle—but not now, when the Department was carefully cutting off all of the 12 Shore Street's possible communication channels and looking for Gondorian illegals from Mongoose's team.

Jacuzzi decided that any leniency was inappropriate at that crucial juncture and ordered a vigorous interrogation of the captured smugglers. A couple of hours later one of Sarrakesh's 'nephews' broke down and described their escaped passenger; Jacuzzi had no trouble recognizing Baron Tangorn from the description.

Upon such recognition he cursed, shortly but colorfully, like a sailor, as he realized that he could not get to Tangorn any time soon. Sarrakesh was from the Peninsula; undoubtedly he sent Tangorn to his relatives in one of the mountain villages. Even if Jacuzzi found out exactly which one (which would be very tough), it would not do him any good—the mountain men never surrender a fugitive to the police. To them, the law of hospitality is sacred and inviolate, and there can be no negotiation on that point; to arrest Tangorn by force he would need a minor army operation, rather than a couple of gendarmes, which no one would authorize. Send *nin'yokve* assassins to the mountains? That would work as an extreme measure, but . . . All right, let's risk a little wait until the baron tries to get back to the Islands—he did try to get straight into the Kharmian Bay last night despite an obvious danger. For a while he has no contact with Vittano's smugglers, so the sea route is closed to him, whereas to seal off the Long Dam is easy as pie.

"Find me everything we have on Uncle Sarrakesh's relatives and friends," the Vice-Director ordered his assistant. "I doubt he has a separate dossier, so you'll have to comb all the materials on Lame Vittano's *zamorro*. Now: who's in charge of agents among the Peninsula's mountain men—Ras-shua, was it?"

CHAPTER 48

Umbar Peninsula, near Iguatalpa Village

June 24, 3019

The chestnut tree in whose shade they camped was at least two hundred years old. All by themselves, its roots were holding together a huge chunk of the slope above the path leading from Iguatalpa[67] to the pass, and doing it well: the spring rains, unusually heavy this year, have not left any landslides or fresh holes in it. From time to time a breeze rustled the luxurious crown of leaves, and then sunspots would drop silently through it down on the yellowish-cream fallen foliage that had accumulated at the foot of the trunk between the mighty roots. Tangorn stretched pleasurably on this wonderful bed (after all, the local paths were not kind on his wounded leg), leaned back on his left elbow and immediately felt some discomfort under it. A bump? A stone? For a couple of seconds the baron lazily considered his dilemma: should he disturb this thick elastic carpet in search of the problem or just move himself a bit to the right? He looked around, sighed, and moved—he did not feel like disturbing anything here, even such a trifle.

The view he saw was amazingly serene. From here, even the Uruapan waterfall (three hundred feet of materialized fury of the river gods trapped by their mountain brethren) looked simply like a cord of silver running down the dark green cloth of the wooded slope.

A little to the right, forming the centerpiece of the composition, the towers of the Uatapao monastery rose above the misty abyss—an antique candelabrum of dark copper all covered in the noble patina of ivy. Interesting architecture, Tangorn thought, everything I've seen in Khand looked totally different. Nor is that surprising: the local version

of Hakimian faith differs substantially from Khandian orthodoxy. Honestly, though, the mountain men have remained pagans; their conversion to Hakima two centuries ago—this most strict and fanatical of world religions—was nothing but another way to distinguish themselves from the mushily tolerant Islanders, all those nothings who have turned their lives into a constant buy-sell litany and who will always prefer profit to honor and blood money to vendetta . . .

Here the baron's leisurely musings were rudely interrupted: his companion, who had already emptied his knapsack and spread the still-warm morning *hachipuri*[68] and wineskin right on it, like on a tablecloth, suddenly put down his dagger (which he had been using to slice the *basturma*[69], hard-dried to the consistency of red stained glass), raised his head, staring at the turn in the path, and pulled his crossbow closer in one habitual movement.

This time the alarm was false, and two minutes later the newcomer was sitting cross-legged by their spread backpack and saying a toast, long and convoluted like a mountain path. He was introduced to Tangorn tersely as a "relative from Irapuato, across the valley" (the baron just shrugged: everyone in these mountains is related somehow). Then the mountain men launched into a genteel discussion of the coming maize harvest and the steel-hardening methods practiced by Iguatalpo and Irapuato blacksmiths; the baron, whose participation in the conversation was anyway limited to a polite smile, began giving its due to the local wine. It is unbelievably tart and thick, its amber depths harboring shimmering pink sparks exactly the color of the first sun rays on a wall of yellowish limestone still wet with dew.

Tangorn used not to understand the charm of this beverage, which is not surprising because it can not stand transportation, whether bottled or barreled, so everything sold down below is no more than an imitation. You can drink the local wine only in the first hours after it has been drawn from the *pifos*[70] where it had fermented with a small jar on a bamboo handle—after that, it is only good for slaking one's thirst. During their forced idleness on board the *Flying Fish* Sarrakesh had gladly educated the baron on the intricacies of mountain winemaking: how the grapes are crushed in a wooden screw together with the vine (hence the unusual tartness) and the juice poured through troughs into the *pifoses* buried throughout the gardens, how the cork is opened for the first time—you have to

carefully snag it from the side with a long hook, looking away lest the escaping thick and unruly wine spirit (the *genie*) drive you crazy . . .

Actually, most of the old smuggler's reminiscences of his rural life were not very warm. It was a very peculiar world, where men were always alert and never without weapons, where women, dressed head to toe in black, were silent shadows always gliding past you along the farthest wall; where the tiny windows in thick walls were nothing but crossbow firing holes and the chief product of the local economy was dead bodies produced by the senseless permanent vendettas; a world where time stood still and one's every step was predestined for decades ahead. It was not surprising that the joyful adventurer Sarrakesh (whose name was very different back then) had always felt foreign there. Meanwhile, the sea that was open to everyone and treated everyone the same was right there . . . so now, when he steered his felucca across foamy storm waves with a steady hand, barking at the crew: "Move it, barnacles!" everyone could see a man in his element.

Which was exactly why the sea wolf allowed himself to categorically oppose Tangorn's plan to return to the city by the twentieth: "No way, forget about it! It's sure failure!"

"I must be in town tomorrow."

"Listen, buddy, did you hire me as a gondolier for an evening sail around the Ring Canal?

No, you needed a pro, right? Well, the pro says that we can't get through today, and that's how it is."

"I must get into town," the baron repeated, "no matter what!"

"Sure you'll get into town—straight into a jail cell. Two days ago the Coast Guard went on high alert, get it? The entrance to the lagoon is shut tight, not even a dolphin can swim by without them noticing. They can't keep this up for long; we gotta wait, at least until the next week, when the moon will start to wane."

Tangorn thought about it for some time.

"All right. If they catch us, what's it to you? Six months in jail?"

"Who cares about jail? They'll confiscate my boat."

"What's your *Flying Fish* worth?"

"No less than thirty dungans, that's for sure."

"Excellent. I'll buy it for fifty. Deal?"

The smuggler gave up: "You're a psycho."

"Perhaps, but the coins I pay with weren't minted in a madhouse."

The venture turned out exactly as Sarrakesh predicted. When a

warning catapult shot from a pursuing galley splashed in a moonlit fountain of water less than fifty yards across their bow, the skipper squinted to estimate the distance to the eddies boiling around reefs to starboard (that night the *Flying Fish*, taking advantage of its paltry draught, was attempting to slip by the very shore of the Peninsula, through reef-studded shallows off-limits to warships), turned to the baron and ordered: “Overboard with you! It’s less than a cable to the shore, you won’t melt. Find my cousin Botashaneanu’s house in Iguatalpa village, he’ll hide you. Give him my fifty dungans. Go!” So what did I gain by jumping into it headfirst? Tangorn thought. Truly it is said: shorter ain’t the same as faster; either way I lost a week. Whatever, hindsight never fails . . . Suddenly a new word—*algvasils*—surfaced in the table discussion of the mountain men, so he started listening intently.

Actually, those were city gendarmes, rather than *algvasils*, commanded by their own officer rather than a Corregidor. Nine men and one officer showed up in Irapuato the day before yesterday. Supposedly they’re looking for the famous bandit Uanako, but in a weird way: sending no patrols, instead they’re going house to house asking whether anyone has seen any strangers. Like anyone will tell those island jackals anything, even if he did see someone . . . On the other hand, one can understand these guys: the bosses want them to catch bandits, so they’re making a decent show of it; they’re not dumb enough to actually climb mountains, risking a crossbow bolt any minute for tiny pay, while their friends are safely milking caravans at the Long Dam . . .

When the guest has departed, Tangorn’s guide (whose name was Chekorello and whose relation to Sarrakesh was beyond the baron’s ken) remarked thoughtfully: “You know, it’s you they’re looking for.”

“Yep,” Tangorn nodded. “Are you by any chance figuring how to turn me in in Irapuato?”

“Are you crazy?! We shared bread!!” The mountain man cut himself short, figuring out Tangorn’s intention, but did not smile. “You know, the folks down below think we’re all dumb up here and don’t get jokes. Maybe so; the people here are intense and just might off you for such a joke . . . Besides,” he suddenly grinned just like a grandfather promising grandkids a magic trick, “nobody’s gonna pay fifty dungans you owe my family for your head. Better I should get you over to the city, like we agreed, and earn that money honestly, true?”

“Totally true. Have you considered the back paths?”

“Well, can’t go through Irapuato now, we’ll have to go around . . .”

“Around? This is more serious than it seems. There’re those strange peddlers in Uahapan—four of them and armed to the teeth, while the tax collector with his *algvasils* is in Koalkoman three weeks early. I strongly dislike this.”

“Yeah, tough . . . Uahapan, Koalkoman, Irapuato—we’re surrounded. Unless . . .”

The baron waved the implied suggestion aside: “If you mean the road to Tuanohato, forget it—bet you that it already has a presence. Most likely traveling circus men who show tricks like putting out candles with a crossbow bolt or slicing apricot pits in midair with a scimitar.

But that’s all right; what bothers me is that we’re surrounded, yet there are no visitors in our village. Why?”

“Haven’t gotten around to us yet?”

“Nope—the only way to Uahapan is through Iguatalpa, right? Better tell me this: if such a team were to show up in our village, would they be able to take me?”

“No way! You’ve told us to watch out for strangers, and we have. Even if they came with a hundred gendarmes, I’d still have time to get you out of the village through backyards, and then good luck finding us in the mountains. Should there be dogs, I have tobacco with pepper.”

“Right, and they know it as well as we do. So what does this mean?”

“You wanna say,” the mountain man squeezed his dagger hilt hard enough to whiten knuckles, “that they’ve found out that you’re in Iguatalpa?”

“For sure. It doesn’t matter how at this point. That’s number one. Number two that I really don’t like is how crudely they’re working. It only seems like all these peddlers, bandit catchers, and tax collectors are a net tightening around us. In reality, it’s a bunch of noisemakers whose job is to chase the quarry towards the hunters.”

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s simple, actually. What did you immediately think about when you heard about gendarmes in Irapuato? Right—the back path through the mountains. Now, how smart does one have to be to station a couple of crossbowmen in camouflage gear by that path?”

Chekorello thought for a long time and then finally managed to say the obvious: “So what’re we gonna do?” thus acknowledging Tangorn

as the leader.

The baron shrugged: “We’ll think, and most importantly, we’ll not do anything rash, which is what they’re trying to make us do. So: Uahapan, Koalkoman, Irapuato—all these are the noisemakers. Let’s think of where the real hunters are and how to slip by them.”

It’s a standard problem, he thought. Once again I’m trying to catch a certain Baron Tangorn, thirty-two years old, brown hair, six feet tall, a Nordic complexion that really stands out around here, plus a recently acquired distinctive slight limp. Strangely enough, in reality it’s not such a simple task—where should I deploy my line of hunters? And who should these hunters be? That last is pretty clear, actually—operatives who can recognize him, and no weapon-clad muscle boys visible from a mile away. The baron will certainly be in make-up and disguise, so even those who know him will have a hard time. How many such people are there? Hardly more than a dozen, more likely seven or eight—it’s been four years, after all. Let’s say a dozen; divide them into four shifts, since an observer can’t be effective for more than six hours at a stretch. Not too many, is it? Makes no sense to split up the team, it has to be a fist, a squad of hunters; no way any of them can be a part of the noisemaking team, since by dividing them, we . . . Damn, but I’m stupid! No hunters among the noisemakers, who’re not expected to meet Tangorn at all—he’s not that much of a fool.

Those teams actually have no need to know what this is all about; their job is just to rattle the bushes. So: key people are few, can’t disperse them, so they’ll have to be concentrated at . . . of course!

“They’ll be waiting for us at the Long Dam, which we can’t bypass,” he announced to Chekorello, who was going bug-eyed after half an hour of an unaccustomed mental effort.

“Here’s how we’ll get past them . . .”

“You’re mad!” was all the mountain man could say after listening to Tangorn’s plan.

“I’ve been told that many times,” replied the baron, “so if I’m a madman, I’m a very lucky one. Are you coming with me? I won’t insist—it’ll be easier for me to do it alone.”

“It all checks out, milord. Men from 12 Shore Street did try to capture him both at the Seahorse Tavern and at Castamir Square. He escaped both times. Four dead at the Seahorse, three infected with leprosy at the Square; too expensive to cover a one-time diversion, to

my taste. 4 Lamp Street is indeed a Gondorian Secret Guard safe house, and he did raid it: one of the sergeants keeping that house was grievously wounded in the chest, his physician confirmed Algali's account. The Secret Guard badge is genuine; that Aravan's handwriting matches the one he's even now using to write explanations at the police headquarters. Plus the entire Gondorian station is turning over stones looking for Algali. In other words, it doesn't seem to be a ruse."

"So why didn't he show up at the Green Mackerel on the twentieth?"

"Possibly he had detected our backup team next to the restaurant and quite reasonably decided that we were violating his terms. That's the best case; the worst is that Aragorn's people got to him. Let's hope for the best, milord, and wait for next Friday, the twenty-seventh. We'll have to skip the backup team, lest the deal fall through again."

"True enough. But he must not leave the Green Mackerel under his own power . . ."

CHAPTER 49

Umbar, 12 Shore Street

June 25, 3019

Mongoose walked unhurriedly down the embassy's corridors.

Not crept along the wall like a fleet weightless shadow, but walked, with his every step echoing through the sleeping building, the wall lamps periodically illuminating his black parade uniform with silver officer's cords on the left shoulder. Actually, Marandil realized almost immediately that this was a trick of the weak light: the lieutenant was wearing civilian clothes, the silver on his shoulder and chest being spots of some kind of whitish mold . . . No, what mold—it's frost, real frost! Frost on clothing—how, from where? Just then a weak but clearly discernible breeze—like an icy breath from a crypt—touched the captain's face, and the flames in the lamps dipped together, as if confirming to dash all hope: no, this is not an illusion! The walls of the embassy, long an unassailable fortress, two layers of slavishly devoted guards, DSD's famed hunting skills—everything had failed . . .

He could physically feel the deathly cold emanating from the approaching figure; this cold froze Marandil's boots to the floor and turned the panicked flurry of his thoughts into gel.

This is it. You knew all along that this was how it was going to end . . . After Aravan's testimony you knew when, now you know how, that's all . . . In the meantime, the lieutenant was turning into a real mongoose leisurely approaching a cobra—a flat triangular head with flattened ears, itself resembling a snake's head, ruby eye beads and blinding white needle teeth under raised whiskers. He, Marandil, was the cobra—an old tired cobra with broken venomous fangs. Any moment now those teeth would sink into his throat, the blood would

spurt from the torn arteries, the delicate neck vertebra would crunch . . . He backed away, futilely trying to shield himself from the approaching nightmare with his hands, and suddenly sprawled flat on his back: his heel caught the upturned edge of a carpet runner.

The pain from a badly bumped elbow rescued the captain, snapping him back into reality.

His terror somehow switched modes, turning from paralyzing to hysterical; Marandil jumped up and sped down the corridor so fast that the wall lamps turned into a blurred fiery line. Stairs . . . down . . . over the railing to the next landing . . . again . . . there's supposed to be a guard here—where is he?.. corridor before the chief's office . . . the guards, where the hell are all the guards?! Footfalls behind—regular, as if measuring the thick silence of the corridor. A-a-a-argh! it's a dead end! where now? The office—no other choice . . . the key . . . doesn't fit in the keyhole, dammit . . . idiot, it's the key to the safe . . . calm down . . . Aúle the Great, help me—this damn lock catches often . . . Footfalls getting closer, like an icy water drip on a shaved head of a prisoner (why isn't he running? Shut up, idiot, don't jinx it!) . . . calm, now . . . turn the key . . . yes!

Squeezing through the barely opened door like a lizard, he pushed it closed with his entire body and locked it at just the moment the werewolf's footfalls reached the threshold. The captain did not strike up the light, having no strength; shaking and sopping wet with sweat, he sat down on the hardwood floor right in the middle of the office, in a large square of moonlight crisscrossed by the window frame. Strangely, Marandil understood that the nightmarish pursuer was still there, but still he somehow felt safe here, sitting on this silvery carpet, as if he was a child who had just touched "base." He glanced distractedly at the pattern of moon shadows on the floor next to him and only then thought of checking out the window itself. Looking at the window, he almost howled in terror and desperation.

There, on the ledge, with his face almost against the windowpane, was a man with an uncanny resemblance to a hyena. Obviously it would be easy for this second werewolf to knock out the window and leap into the room, but he did not move, just stared at Marandil with round faintly phosphorescent eyes. A faint screech of metal came from behind—Mongoose was working on the door lock. At least the key is still in the hole, Marandil thought fleetingly a moment before a terrible blow hammered the door. A jagged hole six or so inches wide appeared beside the lock; faint light from the corridor seeped through

it and was immediately cut down to a few rays when something obscured it. Then, suddenly, the lock clicked and the door opened wide. Only then did Marandil understand that the lieutenant had simply slammed his fist through the door panel and turned the key still in the lock. The captain dashed to the window (the hyena-man on the ledge scared him less than Mongoose), and then two more figures slipped out of the deep shadows in the corners of the room with silent grace; somehow he recognized wolves immediately.

They dragged him out by the feet from under the table where he tried to duck and stood over him, fangs bared, the sharp smell of dog and raw meat wafting over the captain; having realized the manner in which he was about to pay for his betrayal, he could only whine on the floor, trying to cover his throat and crotch . . . Suddenly the entire apparition blew away at the sound of Mongoose's dispassionate voice: "Captain Marandil, you're under arrest in the name of the King. Sergeant, take his weapons, badge, and keys to the safe. To the basement with him!"

No! No! No-o-o-o! It's untrue, this can't be happening—not to him, Captain of the Secret Guard Marandil, the chief of Gondorian station in Umbar! Yet already they are dragging him down the steep chipped stairs (out of the blue he remembered that there were twenty of them, with a large hole in the fourth step from the bottom); once in the basement, they shake him out of his clothes and hang him up by the tied thumbs off a large hook in the ceiling beam. Then Mongoose's face appears in front of his again, eye to eye:

"I'm not interested in your games with the Umbarian Secret Service right now. What I want to know is who advised you to point the Elves to our team by siccing their underground on His Majesty's Secret Guard? Who in Minas Tirith are you working for—Arwen's people?

What do they know about Tangorn's mission?"

"I know nothing about that, I swear by anything!" he croaks, twisting with pain in dislocated joints, understanding full well that this is just a warm-up. "I gave no orders to kidnap that Algali—Aravan is either crazy or working for himself . . ."

"Please begin, Sergeant. So who told you to reveal me to the Elves?"

They know their job well and doze the pain just so, not allowing him to slip away into unconsciousness . . . Then it is all over: the mercy of the Valar is truly boundless, and Vaira's gentle palms pick him up and carry him to the safest refuge—the gloomy halls of

Mandos.

. . . The sun was shining straight into Marandil's eyes—it was almost noon. Groaning, he raised his head (heavy like he had not slept at all) off the rolled-up cloak he had used as a pillow, trying either to swallow or spit out the scream stuck in his dry throat. Habitually he felt for an unfinished bottle of rum by the couch, pulled the cork out with his teeth and took a few large swigs. Alcohol did not help much any more; he had to sniff *kokkaine* to really wake up. Over the last few days fear ate up the chief of station from the inside, leaving only a pitiful shell behind. The captain did not step outside the embassy now and slept only in the daytime, in his clothes: somehow he had convinced himself that Mongoose was going to come for him at midnight, just like in his nightmares.

The nightmares were varied and diverse. In them, Mongoose's special ops team would now slip into his office like shadows, *nin'yokve*-style, then arrive ghost-like right out of the large Khandian wall mirror (when he woke up after that one, he smashed it first thing), or simply break down his door like a regular police squad, uniformed and armed with official papers.

His most vivid recollection was of a dream in which he was attacked by four cat-sized bats.

Fleet and impervious, they chased the captain all over the building, chirping angrily and slapping his head with their leathery wings, going for the eyes; the palms with which he had shielded his face and the back of his head were both already torn into bloody pulp by their tiny sharp teeth, and only then did the usual end come: "Captain Marandil, you're under arrest in the name of the King. Sergeant, take his weapons, badge, and keys to the safe. To the basement with him!"

"Mister Secretary! Mister Secretary, wake up!" Finally he realized that he did not wake up by himself—there was a courier mincing in the door. "Sir Ambassador is summoning you right now."

Right now—that was new. When he received the letter with Aravan's testimony ten days prior in the morning mail, Sir Eldred, the Ambassador Plenipotentiary of the Reunited Kingdom, demanded an explanation from the chief of station. Hearing nothing but pitiful "not my doing, not our affair," he began avoiding the captain like the plague, demonstratively severing all contact with him. The most horrible thing was that the legend that Tangorn had dictated to Aravan sounded so persuasive that Marandil doubted his own sanity: what if he had, indeed, given the order while out of his mind? He

became so convinced that he did away with the wounded Morimir (what if he, too, confirms the order to kidnap Algali once he wakes up?); he did it in a hurry, clumsily, leaving plenty of clues and no way to go back. Marandil felt a suffocating emptiness around himself: his subordinates, to a man, avoided his glance, and all conversation stopped in any room he entered. He knew that it was high time to flee, but he was afraid of being alone in the city even more. The only hope was that DSD would get to Mongoose before he got to him; he no longer believed that his own guard (which was so instructed) would be able to stop him.

"What's the big hurry?" he asked the courier gloomily, trying to smooth out his crumpled clothes.

"They've found some corpse and say it's your department—plenty of small scars around the mouth."

Marandil almost ran into the Ambassador's office and was immediately grabbed by two bedraggled men in dirty jackets who had stationed themselves on either side of the door. Sir Eldred stood a bit aside, affronted aristocratic dignity and bureaucratic servility blending weirdly in his stance and expression—it was obvious that His Eminence had just been administered the proverbial acid enema, a couple of pails worth at least. His chair was occupied by none other than cross-legged Mongoose himself, as dirty as his subordinates.

"Captain Marandil, you're under arrest in the name of the King. Sergeant, take his weapons, badge, and keys to the safe. To the basement with him!" Standing up, he said over his shoulder: "Sir Ambassador, I strongly advise you to find the chief of security and kick his ass. There are at least four ways to get in here, but to fail to even put grates on the sewer openings—such sloppiness is utterly beyond belief! Don't be surprised to find a gypsy camp in the courtyard and a couple of sleeping bums in the lobby one day . . ."

No! No! No-o-o-o! It's untrue, this can't be happening—not to him, Captain of the Secret Guard Marandil, the chief of Gondorian station in Umbar! Yet already they are dragging him down the steep chipped stairs (out of the blue he remembered that there were twenty of them, with a large hole in the fourth step from the bottom); once in the basement, they shake him out of his clothes and hang him up by the tied thumbs off a large hook in the ceiling beam. Then Mongoose's face appears in front of his again, eye to eye:

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"Please begin, Sergeant. So who told you to reveal me to the Elves?"

They know their job well and doze the pain just so, not allowing him to slip away into unconsciousness . . . Then it is all over: the mercy of the Valar is truly boundless, and Vaira's gentle palms pick him up and carry him to the safest refuge—the gloomy halls of Mandos.

You wish!

"You bastard, don't even hope to die before you tell everything you know! Which of Arwen's people are you working for? How do you communicate?"

Nothing was over. It was only beginning . . .

CHAPTER 50

Umbar, the Long Dam

June 27, 3019

The Long Dam of Umbar is not among the Twelve Wonders of the World as enumerated by Ash-Sharam[71] in his Universal History, but that is only a testament to the biases of that great Vendotenian: he preferred pretty playthings like the Barad-Dur tower and the Hanging Temple of Mendor to functional buildings, no matter how grandiose. The seven-hundred-fathom dam that joined the Peninsula to the Islands four centuries ago never failed to impress newcomers to Umbar: it was wider than any city street and allowed two-way caravan traffic. That was what it was built for, actually—so that the merchants moving goods via the Chevelgar Highway to and from the continent would not have to bother with ferries. Not for free, of course: idle tongues insisted that the sheer volume of silver coins charged as tolls over those four centuries was enough to erect another dam of the same size.

A small town of gaudy pavilions, tents, and bamboo cabins sprawled before the massive Customs House, which straddled the dam at the Peninsula end. Here, a merchant worn out by the five-day trek over the winding stretches of the Chevelgar Highway had every opportunity to spend his money on things much more pleasant than custom collectors. The gray shish-kebab smoke rising from the *mangals*[72] was almost tastier than the shish-kebabs themselves, women of all skin colors and sizes unobtrusively paraded their charms, soothsayers and mages promised to predict the outcome of your next business deal for just a piccola, or forever wipe out all your competitors for a castamir . . . Beggars forcefully pled for mercy,

pickpockets trawled the crowds, con artists competed for marks; the policemen calmly plied their racket nearby (this was a rich pasture, to say the least. It is said that a certain rookie policeman had once petitioned his sergeant with the following written request:

"Due to severe financial circumstances thanks to the birth of my third child, I request at least a temporary transfer to the Long Dam"). In other words, it was a miniature Umbar in all its glory.

Today the line crawled like never before. Not only did the customs inspectors appeared about to fall asleep on their feet (while still sticking their noses into every sack), but there was a bottleneck on the dam itself, where the road workers just had to be replacing the roadway cover. A huge black-bearded *caravan-bashi*[73] from Khand already realized that the customs officials—may the Almighty strike them with fever and boils!—have wasted so much of his time that he and his bactrians were not going to make it to the Islands before lunch, and therefore today's marketing was gone to the dogs. All right, why worry and fume now—it's all the Almighty's will. He told his assistant to watch the animals and goods while he was checking out the tent city.

After filling up in one of the eateries (*lagman*[74], three portions of excellent saffron meat stew and a plate of dried-fruit finger pies), he headed back but detoured to a small stage where an olive-skinned dancer dressed only in a few flying strips of cloth was undulating invitingly.

Two mountain men from the Peninsula were devouring her with their eyes (especially the shapely thighs moving back and forth in an unmistakable rhythm and the slick belly), not forgetting to either spit from time to time, as if in disgust ("What do the towners find in these skinny sluts?"), or to trade heartfelt generalities on the subject of townswomen's lack of virtue. The *caravan-bashi* was already figuring what a closer encounter with the dancer in her tent behind the stage was going to cost him, when fate brought a Hakimian preacher out of nowhere. The bald mummy with his rotten rags and burning eyes immediately poured out a storm of denunciations on the heads of "lechers who gaze lustily on the vile show put on by our fallen sister." The 'fallen sister' did not give a damn, but the caravaner decided to retire from the scene promptly, lest the holy man brand him with some nightmarish curse.

He did want a woman something awful, though—five days of withdrawal, man! He scanned his immediate environs, and what do

you know—what he was looking for was right there, a few steps away. The girl did not look like much at first glance—a skinny kid of seventeen or so with a large well-seasoned black eye to boot—but the Khandian checked out her supple figure with his trained eye and almost licked his lips openly—this, guys, was quite something! Cover her face with a rag and go ahead.

"You bored, lass?"

"Keep moving," the girl responded indifferently in a husky but pleasant voice. "I'm not in the business, buddy."

"Not in the business, or haven't had a decent offer yet? Don't you worry, I pay real well!"

With a laugh, as if jokingly, he grabbed her hand with an iron grip.

The girl responded with a short tirade that would easily make a pirate bosun blush, freed her hand from the caravaner's paw with one precise learned movement, and quickly stepped back into the alleyway between a patched tent and a rickety reed-mat pavilion. Actually, there is nothing difficult about that—you have to pull away strictly in the direction of the assailant's thumb tip—but it is impressive the first time around and usually leads to proper conclusions. This time, though, the agitated *caravan-bashi* (some little whore will play hard-to-get with me?!) stampeded into the alleyway after his elusive prey.

Not half a minute later the Khandian was back to the plaza. He was stepping gingerly now, almost tip-toeing, hugging his right hand to his belly with his left and quietly moaning.

Sorry, man, you screwed up. It is child's play for even a rookie DSD operative to dislocate the thumb of a hand extended in a threat, and the girl was far from a rookie. A short time afterwards Fay (as she was known to her colleagues in the Department) was back to her assigned section of the plaza, but the unlucky caravaner would not have recognized her even were he to bump into her: the young whore was gone, replaced by a water-selling boy—ragged and dirty-faced, but with no sign of a black eye, and it is precisely such distinctive features that observers typically notice. She was back to her post just in time: the blind beggar sitting at the very entrance to the dam whined: "Help me if you can, kind folks!" instead of his usual "Kind folks, help me if you can!"—a 'come here' signal.

Of course, Fay remembered their quarry's description (brown-haired northerner, six feet tall, gray eyes, thirty-two but looks younger, slight right limp) word for word, despite only working operation support today, reporting directly to the blind beggar who

worked recognition. Of course, she had no idea that the blind beggar was the Vice-Director for Operations himself, just like she had no knowledge of the stern warning Jacuzzi had received the day before—that if his Tangorn-catching venture did not bear fruit within a day, he would not get away with just being fired without a pension. With a piercing "Water, water, cold water with ice!" the girl slipped expertly into the crowd, trying to figure out who had attracted the chief's attention.

A cart loaded with what appeared to be sacks of corn was just entering the dam. A tall slender mountain man of about twenty-eight to thirty led a couple of mules pulling it; the gap between his raspberry fez and the pavement was exactly the required six feet. As for everything else . . . even discounting the lack of a limp (which could have been a distractive ruse like her erstwhile black eye), the man's eyes were definitely not gray. What about the sacks? The sacks are a serious possibility, which is why the baron has no hopes there. To get past the dam in a barrel or a sack is too obvious a move; it is so overused, banal, and ridiculed that its very kitschiness might tempt Tangorn, who is known for his paradoxical solutions. This is why the customs inspectors are working especially hard today (a rumor about undercover Treasury auditors had been planted among them), and a specially trained dog surreptitiously checks every single cart (which move very slowly because of the road repairs).

Having thus ruled out both the sacks and their owner, Fay glanced sharply at a team of mounted gendarmes with their catch—six mountain men chained in pairs—that had cut into the line ("Watch out! Move back—want some whip?"), made sure they looked all right and looked beyond them. Ah, so that's it!

A group of Hakimian pilgrims returning home from Shavar-Shavan—a traditional three-week pilgrimage to one of their mountain shrines. About thirty people with their faces hooded as a sign of contrition, almost a half of them either epileptics or handicapped, including lameness. A truly ideal cover—even if they recognize the baron (practically impossible), how will they extract him from the crowd of pilgrims? By force, employing the team of 'road workers?' That will start a melee that doesn't bear thinking about, not to mention a possible deadly clash between Hakimians and Aritanians tomorrow in the city.

Entice him to move aside? How? These thoughts almost caused Fay to miss the moment when 'her' blind man got up, yielding his

lucrative spot to another member of the beggars guild, and followed the pilgrims, his cane clacking on the pavement; this meant that he had recognized Tangorn with certainty.

A few moments later Fay morphed from a water-carrier into a guide. The two mountain men that together with the hapless *caravan-bashi* had been ogling the dancer were following a little behind (one of them was Ras-Shua, DSD's resident spy on the Peninsula), followed by a strange group of two shady-looking young men and a worn customs official. Lunch time had arrived for the road workers; they began heading into town, too. The trap on the dam had worked flawlessly, thanks to the old hand Jacuzzi.

"Girl, he did a great job. The idea is excellent, I applaud him. To be honest, it was pure dumb luck that I recognized him; the rest of our guys just plain missed him. Too bad he's not playing on our side . . ."

The Vice-Director's voice was almost tender: a victory invites both magnanimousness and self-criticism. He remembered the little café on Great Castamir's Square, the goblet of Núrnen he had drunk to the gondolier's success, and his verdict: "He is, indeed, an amateur—a brilliant and lucky one, but he'll be lucky once or twice and the third time he'll break his neck . . ." Now is the third time—no one can stay lucky forever.

"How did you recognize him under the hood?"

"The hood? Oh, you think he is one of the pilgrims?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Of course not. He's a prisoner, the right one in the first pair. His face is covered with a bloody cloth, and they all limp—the leg irons are no joke."

"But the gendarmes . . ."

"The gendarmes are real, and he's a real prisoner, that's the point! An excellent and really elegant solution. Don't halt or gape—people will notice. Learn from the pros while they're still around, girl . . . I mean him, not me."

CHAPTER 51

"I still don't understand . . . I mean, I don't understand fully," Fay admitted, seeing that her chief was in a great mood and thus predisposed to explain.

"He figured correctly: the gendarmes were sure to attract our attention—a captured uniform is standard cover—but their catch, provided the gendarmes were real, were much less likely to do so. So he became their catch. I don't know how yet, but it's not really important.

There are many ways . . . for example, he could come to Irapuato and spill half a mug of wine on one of them in the local tavern. They'd beat him up, of course (giving him an excuse to bandage his bloodied face), but then they'd take him into the city without hindrance, hiding him in the best possible hideout for a couple months; neither we nor Aragorn's people would look for him in jail. That is, if he wants to lie low; otherwise he could contact one of his people—Alviss, say—through the criminals, and they'd buy him out in a day or two. Well, my plans don't include letting him cool his heels in a jail cell."

Following the gendarmes (who were, indeed, the 'bandit hunters' of Irapuato) at about fifty yards distance, Jacuzzi and his companion reached the harbor police station. The prisoners were divided at that point: four were herded on, while the team leader personally took Tangorn and the mountain man chained to him (Ras-Shua had already identified him as one Chekorello, Sarrakesh's nephew twice removed) into the station. After waiting fifteen minutes for propriety's sake, Jacuzzi went inside, too. When the guard attempted to stop two ragged beggars, he showed him a police commissar's badge (he had plenty of badges on his person, from Admiralty flag captain's to a customs inspector's—the important part was not to mix them up) and drily ordered him to take them to the local chief.

"Commissar Rahmajanian," he introduced himself once in the chief's office. Its occupant, a mussed-looking fat man with hanging

jowls who looked like a caricature of a police chief come alive, made a not-entirely-successful attempt to pry his expansive backside out of the chair and greet his visitor: “Senior Inspector Jezin. Have a seat, Commissar. How can I help you? Is the girl from your staff, by the way?”

“Certainly.” Fay’s disguise had not fooled Jezin for even a second. A bunch of clues had already led Jacuzzi to conclude that the chief was, on the one hand, sufficiently perceptive (which was not surprising, given that the harbor station was a real gold mine, with plenty of contenders for that plum post), and, on other hand, simple and straightforward: for example, his table sported an unopened bottle of Elvish wine, which would have cost him about three months’ salary in the *Elfstone* store on the Three Stars Embankment. Way too brazen, Jacuzzi thought sadly. Fortunately, keeping police noses clean was not part of DSD’s duties.

“About half an hour ago two arrested mountain men were supposed to be delivered here . . .” he began, but the Senior Inspector protested vigorously: “You’re mistaken, Commissar, no prisoner deliveries here for the past couple of hours!”

This was so unexpected that Jacuzzi tried to explain to the fat man that arguing was useless, since it all happened in his plain sight.

“You must’ve been hallucinating, Commissar,” the man answered impudently, signaling the guard at the door. “The Corporal here will attest: we have no mountain men detained here and never had!”

Jacuzzi shook his head sorrowfully: “We’re misunderstood here, girl.” This was a code phrase. The next moment Fay stabbed the corporal in the base of the neck, straight between the clavicles, with her suddenly steel-like index finger; a second later the thick office door was locked from the inside, cutting the Senior Inspector off from his subordinates in the corridor. Meanwhile, Jacuzzi intercepted Jezin’s hand, which was going towards the nearest weapon, and with a single twist of the wrist made him collapse into the chair, choking on a scream. Looking around, the Vice-Director of Operations broke off the Elvish bottle’s neck with the edge of his palm and dumped its precious contents on the policeman’s head and neck; once the man came to, Jacuzzi pulled him up by the collar and asked with all possible fondness: “Where’re the prisoners?”

The fat man shook and sweated, but remained silent. Having no time to spare—at any moment someone might start breaking down the door—Jacuzzi made his proposition short and to the point: “Ten

seconds to think about it. Then I'll start counting to five, breaking a finger at each count. On the count of six I'll cut your throat with this razor. Look in my eyes—do I look like I'm joking?"

"You're from the Secret Service, right?" the Senior Inspector mumbled mournfully, gray with terror. It was clear as day that he had not earned his stripes capturing criminals in the Kharmian Village slums.

"Six seconds gone. Well?"

"I'll tell you everything I know! They ordered me to let them go . . ."

"Ordered?" Jacuzzi felt the floor drop out from under him; there was a revolting feeling of freefall in his stomach.

"They're men of the King of Gondor, from his Secret Guard. They were on a secret mission in the Peninsula, but the mountain men figured them out and were about to execute them.

They managed to escape to Irapuato through the woods, made contact with the city gendarmes who're looking for Uanako there, and ordered their commander to evacuate them to the city as prisoners . . . Here at the station they told me to get them some clothes and let them out by the back door. They also said," the man cringed pitifully, "that if I told anyone about this, they'd find me anywhere, even in the Far West . . . I understand that legally the Secret Guard of Gondor has no authority here, but . . . you know?"

"What made you think that they're Aragorn's men?"

"One of them is obviously a Northerner from Gondor, and he presented a Secret Guard sergeant's badge . . ."

"Sergeant Morimir or Sergeant Aravan . . ." Jacuzzi muttered, not recognizing his own voice.

What bout of insanity could have made him forget the badges Tangorn got from his raid on 4 Lamp Street?!

"Yes, sir, Sergeant Morimir! So you know these people?"

"Yes, better than I'd like to. When this Morimir changed clothes, have you noticed whether he had anything in his pockets?"

"Just money, nothing else."

"How much?"

"About ten castamir *s* and change."

"What kind of clothes did you give them?"

The Vice-Director for Operations nodded mechanically while Jezin described the rags he obligingly gave to his important guests in minute detail, paying only minimal attention—this information was

nearly useless. Ten castamir *s* . . . He turned to Fay.

"Leave right now through the same exit they've used. Eruko's store is to the left, towards the Ring Canal. It's possible that they will buy new clothes there: it's not cheap, but ten castamir *s* should be enough. If not, continue along the bank . . ."

"To the Flea Market?"

"Correct. Right now they badly need to change clothes, and soon—it's our only chance.

Move."

He sat down heavily on the low stone wall by the entrance to the police station and stretched out a hand without looking. Ras-Shua, sitting down by his side, immediately put a flask of rum in his hand; Jacuzzi took a couple of swigs and stared fixedly at the setting sun. His head was achingly empty. Sure, they'll pick up Tangorn's trail eventually, but that won't save him: Almandin's deadline is in an hour. He felt no animosity towards the baron: the man played by the rules.

"I got them, chief!" Suddenly, a beaming Fay appeared before him, looking happy and winded—apparently, she ran all the way. "They've changed at Eruko's, just like you said, and then went straight into the Seamen Credit Bank next door!"

It could not be, but there it was. It looked like today Fate undertook a pointed demonstration of how little our efforts and skills mean compared to her whims. After all, he thought as he hurried after Fay towards the Seamen Bank (the girl had prudently engaged three street urchins to watch the place), after all it looks like I got away with a scare, whereas the baron is really unlucky today: he's doing everything first-rate, good enough to include in the Operations Manual, and still . . .

By the time Tangorn and Chekorello left the bank, dressed now with understated luxury, the DSD's finks have woven an unbreakable web around them. The friends embraced three times in the mountain fashion and then went their separate ways. The reason for the visit to the bank became clear as soon as one of the operatives, who had superb pick-pocketing skills, detected by touch that Chekorello was now "brimming with coin like a September trout with eggs." Jacuzzi ordered everyone to forget the mountain man—let him go in peace—and concentrate on following Tangorn. Just then reinforcements showed up (an observation team), and the baron's chances of escaping surveillance became nil: no lone individual can beat an organization,

provided it is a halfway decent one.

Tangorn spent the next two hours cruising around the city expertly and flamboyantly—melting into market crowds, hiding out in empty echoing open-ended courtyards, suddenly jumping into gondolas for hire—but utterly failing to either lose or even spot the surveillance. Unlike the Gondorian spies, DSD professionals were of the highest caliber.

Only once did the Higher Powers warn Jacuzzi (who had calmed down and was now hanging back like a mobile headquarters of the operations) that he should not relax prematurely. Observers reported that the baron, having carefully checked his surroundings, had entered the Green Mackerel restaurant; should they follow him inside and risk detection or simply wait outside?

"Is the back of the restaurant covered?" Jacuzzi asked for formality's sake. The operative paled and swallowed convulsively.

"Holy crap!" the Vice-Director roared, once again experiencing freefall in his stomach.

"Don't you know that the damn Mackerel's restroom window is large enough to push a boar through? I'll fire the whole damn lot of you idiots!"

While saying that Jacuzzi had time to think that if Tangorn had indeed spotted them and had already ducked into that restroom, then he, at least, won't be doing any firing . . . But the scare blew over: it turned out that the baron was having a proper dinner in a private room with two gentlemen, one of whom the operatives identified as the missing Junior Secretary Algali.

CHAPTER 52

Umbar, the Green Mackerel restaurant

June 27, 3019

"By the way, how did that story with your cousin's broken engagement end up?" Tangorn asked nonchalantly once the meal was over and Algali had left them for the common room at his companion's barely discernible gesture.

"Nothing much; I suppose that Linóel is already seeing someone else. By the way, if you expect to impress me with your knowledge of Lórien's high society gossip, then the effect is rather the reverse: this bit of news is really stale."

Score one for me, Tangorn thought, else why did you volunteer an explanation right away?

Maybe these Elves aren't as perceptive as rumor has it. Aloud he said: "I just wanted to ensure that you are, indeed, Elandar: you mentioned the name Linóel, and that's what I was looking for. Very primitive, of course, but . . ." he smiled a slightly bashful smile, "actually, could you please remove your half-mask?"

"As you wish."

Yes, his interlocutor was undoubtedly an Elf: he had vertical rather than round pupils, like those of a cat or a snake; one could also ask to take a look at the tips of his ears, hidden under the hairdo, but there was no real need. You've made it to your goal, knight.

Through the mossy forests and churning rivers, through treacherous bogs and snowy peaks did the noble knight struggle, until the magic ball led him to the Uggun Gorge, with burned slag for ground, bile flowing in the streams, and no grass. There did the Dragon abide in his lair under the granite boulders . . .

Actually, as long as we're in the ancient ballad mode, let's be frank: rather than the noble knight, you're his tricky armor bearer whose only task is to steal up to the entrance to the lair, throw some poison bait inside and run away immediately. It will be up to Haladdin to battle the great worm once he emerges, but the doctor will only have a chance if the monster gobbles the poison bait first: the well-sealed package you had retrieved two hours ago from the Seamen Bank safe where it had spent all this time together with the *mithril* coat and some other stuff. Sure, this is hardly knightly behavior, but our task is to rid the world of the dragon, rather than to make it into children's books.

"You're satisfied, I hope?" the Elf broke the prolonged silence. Scorn shone in the depth of his eyes like a pair of bluish swamp gas flames.

"I suppose so. I don't know Elandar personally, but the verbal description seems to match."

That was pure bluff, but it seemed to have gone over smoothly; in any case there were no more ways to check. "Should you not be who you say you are, now is the best time to drop out, believe me. The thing is that the information I'm about to entrust to you may cost some of Lórien's higher-ups their heads, so they will most likely hunt its keeper as vigorously as Aragorn's men are hunting me. *Clofoel* Eornis' son will be able to handle it appropriately while, importantly, staying alive, unlike any lower-placed Elf. It's a well-known axiom that dangerous information is destroyed together with its carriers; I'm sure you understand what learning what one is not supposed to know, even accidentally, means . . ." With those words Tangorn glanced meaningfully towards the exit Algali had used.

"Yes, you're right," the other man nodded calmly, having followed Tangorn's glance. "I am, indeed, Elandar, while you, Baron, since you know Lady Eornis' internal title, do indeed know how Lórien works. But I'm afraid that you're overestimating my rank in the hierarchy."

"Not at all. You're to play the same role as I am—that of an intermediary. The information, as you've probably guessed, is meant for your mother. Moreover, I have reasons to believe that *clofoel* Eornis is not the ultimate addressee, either."

"Ah so?.." Elandar drawled thoughtfully. "So Faramir did manage to obtain proof that certain parties in Lórien have indeed befriended Aragorn and are about to use the Reunited Kingdom as a trump in their game against Lady Galadriel . . . Is the Prince of Ithilien hoping

that she will return the throne of Minas Tirith to him as a reward?"

"I repeat—I'm just an intermediary, I'm not empowered to name any names. Why, does something in this scheme seem unlikely to you?"

"Theoretically it's quite plausible . . . maybe too plausible. It's just that—no offense—I don't trust you personally even a little bit, Baron. There's way too much noise about your person.

Aragorn's people do seem to be hunting you, but you're suspiciously lucky, first at the Seahorse, then at that Castamir puddle. Or take this story with freeing Algali—who can believe such a coincidence?"

Tangorn shrugged. "It is difficult for me to object, as the story is, indeed, incredible. Do you still suspect that the incident at 4 Lamp Street is my doing?"

"I did until yesterday," Elandar admitted glumly. "However, yesterday Captain Marandil was arrested and had testified thoroughly about the incident. He did order Algali's kidnapping . . ."

Tangorn had to struggle to keep his jaw from dropping to the floor. Truly it is said: "Too good is no good, either."

"We're spinning wheels, dear sir," he said abruptly, feeling that it was time to mount an attack. "In any event you won't be the one to make decisions in this matter—not your level, if you pardon the expression. All I need to know is whether you have the means to deliver my message to milady Eornis and keep anyone else in Lórien from finding out? If not, I have to seek other channels, and this conversation is pointless."

The Elf stroked the package lying on the table thoughtfully, clearly looking for traces of magic. Tangorn held his breath: *the dragon approached the bait and sniffed it warily*.

Actually he had nothing to fear—physically, the package was clean and trick-free.

He smirked: "I hope you can detect the absence of poisons or directed magic without opening the package?"

"I'll manage somehow . . ." Elandar hefted the package. "This weighs almost half a pound, and I clearly detect metal inside . . . quite a bit of metal. What else is there beside the message?"

"The message is wrapped in several layers of thick silver foil, so that it can't be magically read from outside." The Elf nodded almost imperceptibly. "The outer cover is sackcloth; the knots of the cords tying it are sealed and have metal rings woven into them right under the seals. It is impossible to secretly open such packaging: one can

neither boil the wax away, since it's too deeply infused into the sackcloth, nor carefully slice the seals away with a thin hot blade—the rings are in the way. This is how they seal government mail in Khand, and I know of no method that's more secure. Another precaution is that the knots that secure the rings are unlikely to be known to any Elves. Please observe."

With those words Tangorn quickly tied a piece of string around the handle of a fruit knife and handed it to Elandar. The Elf tried to figure out the elaborate pattern, then gave up with obvious displeasure: "One of the local marine knots?"

"Not at all. It's just that the Elves are very conservative and only use a single knot to tie string to a bow, whereas there are at least three such knots, of which this is one."

Elandar stuffed the package inside his jacket in annoyance and examined the knot again.

Sure, it's annoying for a member of the higher race to fail at such a trifle. Tangorn froze, afraid to believe his eyes. *The dragon swallowed the bait* . . . he did . . . gulped it, munched, gobbled, wolfed it down! Suddenly, as if sensing the happy jumble of thought and emotion in his mind, the Elf raised his gaze and stared the baron in the eye. With horror Tangorn felt an irresistible force pull him inside the slits of Elandar's bottomless pupils, felt cold fingers picking through his soul with habitual disgust . . . *Even a small child knows you can't look the dragon in the eye!* He pulled away with all the power of his despair; so does a fox spring out of the steel trap, leaving behind scraps of hide, bits of flesh with shards of broken bones, and ragged sinews. I know nothing—I'm a messenger, nothing more! The pain was terrible, almost physical, and then it was suddenly over—he managed to free himself . . . or did the Elf just let him go? Then he heard Elandar's voice, muffled as if in a dream:

"That you hate us is immaterial: politics bring even stranger bedmates together. But you're hiding something dangerous and important about this package, and that is really bad. What if all that's inside is some local state secret like the Umbarian fire recipe or one of the Admiralty's maps, and the DSD is waiting at the door to send me off to the galleys for thirty years or so, or perhaps straight to the Ar-Horan gallows, it being wartime and all? Wouldn't it be nice to have me arrested for espionage, eh?"

"That's not so . . ." Tangorn objected feebly, unable to open his eyes; his tongue was leaden, and he felt like either vomiting or just

dying. I wonder if this is what a woman feels after rape?

"Not so?" the Elf grunted. "Perhaps. Still, it seems to me that your little gift stinks!"

The dragon didn't even consider swallowing the bait; all he did was sniff it lazily and drag it back to his lair, just in case, there to lie forever amidst shards of broken armor of those who had dared challenge the monster, kings' crowns, golden chalices from leveled cities, and skeletons of fair maidens . . .

It's over, Tangorn realized: he had lost the most important fight of his entire life. As Eru is his witness, he did everything humanly possible, but at the last moment Fortune turned away from him . . . him and Haladdin. Does this mean that he was mistaken and the Higher Powers do not approve of their mission?

In the meantime Algali came back to their room—it was time to wrap up. Elandar, having turned into a refined gentleman again, amused his companions with a fresh joke, complained about urgent business forcing him to abandon this pleasant company ("No, Baron, by no means should you accompany me; better spend another ten minutes or so here with Algali"), filled their glasses from a pocket flask ("To our success, Baron! This is real Elvish wine, nothing like the swill they sell at *Elfstone*, believe me"), drank the dark ruby liquid in a single draught, put the half-mask back on his face and headed out.

Tangorn and Algali sat across from each other in silence for a couple of minutes, the untouched goblets like border markers on the table between them. Dear Elandar is making sure I'm not following him, the baron thought lazily. I wonder if mister junior secretary knows that I can get out of this restaurant any minute through the restroom window? He could, although that's unlikely . . . The thing is —I don't need it any more.

What a rotten trick did I play on you, lad, he thought suddenly when he met the childishly open gaze of the 'carrier of unsuitable information.' Maybe that's why the Higher Powers have turned away from me? Now it turns out that I swam in that indelible muck—with you and the guy at 4 Lamp Street—for no good reason. I played a trick on you, they played one on me; as usual, the gods have the last laugh.

"You know, I'll sit here for a while longer, but you should make legs as fast as you can, if you value your life. Your Elvish friends have sentenced you to death. I suggest using the restroom window—someone your size will squeeze through with no difficulty."

"Even if I believed you," the youth answered disdainfully, "I would

not have accepted salvation from you."

"Really? Why?"

"Because you are an Enemy. You fight on the side of Darkness, so your every word is a lie, and your every deed is evil by definition."

"You're mistaken, lad," Tangorn sighed wearily. "I'm on neither the Dark nor the Light side. If you need a label, I'm on the side of many colors."

"There is no such side, Baron," Algali bit out, and his eyes flashed. "The Battle of Battles is coming, Dagor-Dagorlad, and everybody—yes, everybody!—will have to make a choice between Light and Dark. Whoever is not with us is against us!"

"That's a lie—such a side exists, very much so." Tangorn was not smiling any more. "If I'm fighting for anything, it's for this precious Dagor-Dagorlad of yours to never happen.

I'm fighting for the right of those of many colors to remain such without getting dragged into this total mobilization of yours. And speaking of Light and Dark—I suppose your master represents the Light?"

"He's my Teacher, not my master!"

"Fine. Now look at this." With these words he took a piece of white quartz-like stone attached to a silver chain out of his pocket. "This is an Elvish poison detector—ever seen one?"

When immersed into their goblets, the stone gave off an ominous purple light.

"Judging by the color, this poison works in about half an hour. All right, I'm an enemy, but is poisoning one's Pupil a tradition of the forces of Light?"

Tangorn never expected what happened next: Algali snatched the nearest goblet, raised it to his lips and drained it before the baron could grab his arm.

"You're lying!" The youth's face became pale and inspired, filled with otherworldly exultation. "And if not, then so what: it means that it's necessary to our Cause."

"Thank you, lad," the baron said after a minute's stupor. "You don't even know how much you just helped me . . ."

He headed to the exit without saying goodbye, but paused at the door for one last look at the doomed fanatic. Scary to even think of what will happen to Middle Earth should these boys prevail. Maybe I didn't play my part too well, but at least I played for the right team.

. . . Jacuzzi mustered enough self-control not to hang out in front

the Green Mackerel himself, relying on the pros from the surveillance team. Neither Tangorn's contact with the Elvish underground nor the identity of his interlocutor concerned the Vice-Director of DSD at the moment. He knew that the fates of both the Republic and himself hinged on one thing only: Tangorn's next destination. Will he go right or left, to the port or to New Town? He knew that but could do nothing about it, so all he did was pray to all the gods he knew: to the One, to the Sun-faced, to the Unnamed, even to Eru-Ilúvatar of the northern barbarians and to Udugvu the Great Snake. What else could he do? So when he finally heard: "The target has left the restaurant heading to New Town," his first thought was: which one of them had listened to my prayers? Or perhaps God is, indeed, one, and it's just that He has different cover stories and code names for different countries?

The surveillance team leader reported, concerned: "The streets are already empty while the target is very careful. Tracking him will be exceedingly difficult . . ."

". . . and not really necessary," Jacuzzi finished for him and laughed; the Vice-Director knew with certainty now that Fortune was on his side, and the anticipation of victory—sweeter even than victory itself—filled him to bursting. "Pull back all surveillance and tell the capture team to switch to Plan B."

CHAPTER 53

Umbar, 7 Jasper Street

Night of June 27, 3019

Jasper Street was deserted at night, but the habit of checking for a tail was impossible to shake. Tangorn smirked: if anyone was tracking him, he had an unenviable task. This was not the port with its ever-milling crowds, but a respectable aristocratic neighborhood whose streets held about as many people outside after dark as the Moon shining down on them.

But in reality, who would need him now that the idiot Marandil has been arrested? More importantly, does he need himself? Does Alviss? What he does need now is a quiet hideout where he can sit and meditate on the following: did he fail to win at the Green Mackerel, or did he not want to win? At the last moment, was he afraid of a victory, remembering his unspoken deal with the Higher Powers: the end of the mission would be the end of his earthly life? Not that he was afraid then, no—it's just that at the cusp of his duel with Elandar he couldn't grit his teeth and do it even against his will. It was not strength or skill he was short of then, not even luck—no, just plain persistence and doggedness . . .

Thinking these thoughts, he had reached the jewelry shop of the honorable Chakti-Vari (a bronze snake on the door informed potential thieves that the place was being guarded by king cobras, as was the Vendotenian custom; any doubters were welcome to check), crossed the street, checked for surveillance again and opened the little door in the eight-foot limestone wall with his own key. Alviss' two-storey house was deep inside the garden, at the end of a sand path. The dashes of silver liberally applied by the Moon to the oleanders' waxy

leaves made the shadows under the bushes even darker, and the cicadas were singing a deafening chorus . . . whereas those who were waiting for the baron in the moonlit garden could easily hide on a freshly mowed lawn in the middle of the day and walk noiselessly across a creaky wooden floor covered with dry leaves. Not surprisingly, the blow to the back of the head (a large sock filled with sand—cheap and effective) took him unawares.

Plunged into darkness, Tangorn did not see several black-robed figures gathering over him; nor did he see another set of figures, their robes of a slightly different cut, coalesce out of the night around them. He did not see what happened next, either—not that he would have made much sense of it: a *nin'yokve* fight is not something an amateur can follow. It mostly resembles the chaotic dance of a pile of dry leaves blown up by a gust of wind; the battle rages in absolute, totally unnatural silence, broken only by the sound of connecting blows.

When seven or eight minutes later the baron was yanked out of his unconsciousness by the nauseating stink of smelling salts, it was all over. Once he opened his eyes, a robed man took the vial away from his face and stepped away without a word. His back was against something hard and uncomfortable; in a couple of seconds he realized that he had been carried up to the house entrance and propped against the stairs. The robed men moved quickly and noiselessly about; the ones in a large spot of moonlight right then were dragging a man-sized sack with a pair of soft boots sticking out of it. Two people were talking somewhere behind Tangorn, one with a drawl of a Peninsula man; Tangorn kept his head motionless and strained to hear.

". . . nothing but corpses. We netted one, but he managed to poison himself."

"Yeah . . . disappointing, to put it mildly. How did this happen?"

"I've never met tougher guys. We have two dead and two maimed, first time I can remember such losses."

"Who?"

"Jango and Ritva."

"Damn!.. Write a report. No traces here in five minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Approaching footsteps rustled across the grass, and a tall slender man appeared before Tangorn. Unlike the others, he was dressed in civilian clothes, but he, too, was hooded.

"How do you feel, Baron?"

“I’ve been worse, thank you. To what do I owe the pleasure?..”

“A special team of Aragorn’s people tried to capture you, probably for a debrief and a liquidation. We interfered, but we’re not counting on your gratitude, as I’m sure you understand.”

“Oh, so I was used as bait!” Having said ‘bait,’ the baron laughed sarcastically, but cut it short due to a stab of pain in the back of his head. “Are you DSD?”

“I’m not familiar with this acronym, nor is this important. I have bad news for you, Baron: tomorrow you’ll be charged with murder.”

“Of Gondorian spies?”

“I wish! No, of an Umbarian citizen Algali, whom you’ve poisoned tonight at the Green Mackerel.”

“I see. Why wait until tomorrow?”

“Because, for several reasons, my service is not interested in your revelations to the investigators or the courts. You have until noon tomorrow to leave Umbar forever. Should you delay and wind up in jail, please don’t blame us for assuring your silence by other means. Honorable Kantaridis’s caravan is leaving tomorrow morning via Chevelgar

Highway with a couple of available bactrians. The border guards will receive your description with an appropriate delay. Is everything clear, Baron?”

“All but one thing. The easiest solution would be to liquidate me right now. Why not?”

“Professional solidarity,” smiled the hooded man. “Besides, I really like your *takatos*.”

The garden was almost empty by now, the robed figures having vanished into the darkness whence they came without a sound. The hooded stranger followed his men, but right before disappearing forever into shadow between the oleanders he turned and said: “By the way, Baron, another bit of free advice—tread carefully until you’ve left Umbar. I’ve followed you today all the way from the Long Dam, and I can’t help but feel that you’ve used up your entire store of luck. One can feel such things instantly; I’m not joking, believe me.”

It did look like his store of luck was empty. Well, that depends: today he lost to everyone—the Elves, Aragorn’s men, the DSD—but managed to stay alive. No, wait—actually, he was allowed to live, that’s different. Or did he dream up the whole thing? The garden is empty, no one to ask but the cicadas . . . He got up and knew right away that he did not dream up the blow to the head, at least: pain and

nausea sloshed around in his skull at about the ear level.

He put his hand inside his jacket to find the key and felt the warm metal of the *mithril* mail, which he had put on back at the bank, for extra protection before meeting Elandar. Yeah, it did help a lot today, right . . .

The moment he managed to insert the key into the keyhole, the door opened and he faced the sleepy butler, a huge phlegmatic Haradi named Unkva; Tina, scared, was peering from behind his shoulder. He moved inside past the servants; Alviss, closing her robe as she ran down the stairs, was already near.

"Goodness, what happened? Are you wounded?"

"No, just a little drunk." Dizziness hit him with such force that he had to lean against a wall.

"Was just passing by, thought I'd call on you for old times' sake . . ."

"Liar . . ." she sniffled, and her arms went around his neck, leaving the wide sleeves behind.

"God, how I'm tired of you . . ."

. . . They lay side by side, barely touching, and his hand glided slowly from her neck down to the curve of her thigh—carefully, as if not to brush off the silvery moonlight.

He finally mustered the courage to say: "Aly!" and she, somehow understanding immediately what he was about to say, sat up slowly, hugging her knees and putting her head down on them. Words stuck in his throat; he touched her arm and felt her moving away a tiny distance that he would now have to spend the rest of his life crossing, without any guarantee that it would be enough time. That was how she was: constitutionally incapable of making a scene, she could be silent in a manner that made him feel like a total bastard for a week . . . and that's exactly what you are, Baron. Didn't she have some sort of a matrimonial prospect on the horizon before you showed up? She's no little girl, she's almost thirty . . . you're an asshole, Baron, an indifferent selfish asshole.

"Your Secret Service courteously gave me until tomorrow noon to quit Umbar forever, or they'll just kill me. I'm in their sights and can't escape. So it goes, Aly . . ." He thought: this is probably how men tell their mistresses that they can't see them while their wives are suspecting something; he almost cringed with self-disgust.

"You seem to be justifying yourself, Tan. Why? I understand—it's just Fate. And don't worry about me," she raised her head and

suddenly gave a quiet laugh, “I was more farsighted this time around.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing, just woman stuff . . .” She got up and put on her robe. There was something so final in that movement that he asked involuntarily: “Where’re you going?”

“To pack your things, where else?” she looked at him with a bit of surprise. “See, I can never be a high-society dame. Sorry, I’m just not refined enough. I should’ve made a hysterical scene right now, just for formality’s sake, right?”

He had lost too much today in one fell swoop: the goal he has been striving for all these months, his belief in himself, the country that became his second home (even if against his will), and now Alviss . . . Knowing it was all over, he plunged ahead desperately like a man jumping off the pier to catch up with a departing ship.

“Listen, Aly . . . I really can’t stay in Umbar, but you . . . what would you say if I asked you to go to Ithilien with me and become Baroness Tangorn there?”

“I would say,” there was nothing but infinite weariness in her voice, “that you’ve always been too fond of the subjunctive, whereas women, by their nature, prefer the imperative mood. Sorry.”

“What if I change the mood?” He was trying as hard as he could to smile. “In the imperative it goes like this: marry me! Is that better?”

“That?” She stood still, eyes closed and hands clenched on her chest, as if really listening to something. “You know, it does sound a lot better! Say it again.”

He said it again, first in front of her on one knee, then while slowly twirling her around the room. Then she did have a bit of hysterics, laughing and crying at the same time . . . When they got back to bed, she first put a finger to his lips and then took his hand in hers and carefully pressed it to her belly, whispering: “Shh! Don’t scare him!”

“So you . . . I mean, we . . .” was all he could say.

“Yes! Remember, I said that I was more farsighted this time than four years ago? Now, no matter what else happens, I’ll have him. You see,” she clung to Tangorn with a quiet laugh and tenderly rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, “somehow I know that it will be a boy, just like you.”

He lay there in silence for some time, futilely trying to bring his thoughts into a semblance of order—too much at once. Tangorn the adventurer’s old life is over, that much is clear, but perhaps a quiet family idyll with Alviss is precisely the end that the Higher Powers

meant? Or, conversely, am I being paid off to abandon Haladdin? But I can't do anything else for him, my mission in Umbar has failed . . . Really? What if you had an opportunity right now to replay this and give your life in exchange for victory over Elandar? I don't know . . . half an hour ago I would've given it without a doubt, but now—I don't know.

Chances are, I would've found some decent way of weaseling out of it, to be honest. Some trap this is . . . Oh, to hell with it all! he thought fatalistically, I have no strength left to figure out those puzzles, trying to imagine what the Higher Powers want. Let it all be however it will be.

He finally gave up trying to gather his thoughts, since all kinds of trivialities kept coming up anyway. "Listen, won't you be bored in Emyn Arnen? To be honest, it's quite the backwater."

"You know, I've had quite enough fun over my twenty-eight years here, in our capital of the world, enough for three lives. Don't worry about it. Anyway, Baron," she stretched alluringly, putting her hands behind her head, "isn't it time for you to perform your marital duties?"

"Absolutely, dear Baroness!"

CHAPTER 54

At dawn a *vivino* was singing in the garden. The bird perched on a chestnut branch right outside their open bedroom window; at first, his sad melodic trills seemed to Tangorn to be threads plucked out of the fabric of his dreams. He slipped out of bed (carefully so as not to disturb Alviss) and stole up to the window. The tiny singer put up his head so high that the yellow throat feathers formed a frothy collar around his neck, and finished with an excellent resounding note; then he turned his head in mock modesty and expectantly glanced at the baron: did you like it? Thank you, little friend! I know that *vivinos* are forest dwellers that hate the city. Did you fly here to say good bye?

Right! the bird winked mockingly and flitted into the garden; the *vivino* was a true Umbarian, stranger to Nordic sentimentality.

Bare feet pattered almost noiselessly, and warm Alviss clung to him from behind, brushing her lips across his shoulder blades.

"What did you see out there?"

"A *vivino* was singing—a real *vivino* in the city, can you imagine?"

"Oh, that's my *vivino*. He's been here for almost a month."

"I see . . ." Tangorn drawled, feeling, funnily enough, something like a pang of jealousy.

"And here I thought that he came here for me . . ."

"Listen, maybe he really is yours? He showed up in my garden the same time you did . . . Yes, right around the first of the month!"

"In any event, it's the best goodbye one can wish from Umbar . . . Hey, Aly, look—there's another goodbye!" he laughed, pointing at a gloomy sleepy policeman stationed across the street beside Chakti-Vari's jewelry shop. "The Secret Service politely reminds me to tread carefully until I leave . . . All right. Have you changed your mind about going today?

Maybe you want to settle your affairs here first?"

"No way!" she responded curtly. "I'm coming with you. That caravan has two available bactrians—isn't that a sign? My lawyer will

have to settle my affairs anyway, it's a job for weeks. I suppose everything should be converted to gold, can't be much of a market for securities up North."

"Nobody there would know what they are," he nodded, watching Alviss dress with a smile.

"Aren't we quite a sight, girl? A bankrupt aristocrat with nothing but a sword and a moth-eaten title is marrying the money of a successful widow of the merchant class . . ."

". . . said widow having made her start by selling her body left and right," Alviss concluded in the same vein. "A total misalliance no matter how you look at it, a gold mine for gossips from both classes."

"That's for sure . . ." He had a sudden thought and started figuring something. "Listen, I just thought . . . there's plenty of time until noon. Want to get married right away? Choose any rite."

"Yes, darling, certainly . . . I don't care which rite, either. Let's go Aritanian—their temple is nearby."

"Aly, what's the problem? You seem unhappy."

"No, of course not! I just had a real bad premonition when you started talking marriage."

"Nonsense," he said firmly. "Let's get dressed and go. Aritanian is fine. By the way, your stone is sapphire, right?"

"Yes, why?"

"While you pretty up, I'll have enough time to visit the honorable Chakti-Vari across the street and buy a wedding present. It's early, but for this kind of money," he picked up the bag with the remainder of Sharya-Rana's gold, "the old man will fly out of bed like a startled pheasant and . . ."

He cut himself short at the sight of Alviss' face: she paled and her eyes turned from blue to black with widened pupils.

"No!! Tan, dearest, don't go, I pray you!"

"Baby, what's the matter? Another premonition?" She nodded vigorously, unable to speak.

"There's no danger—I'm out of the game, nobody wants me."

She had already gotten hold of herself. "All right, but let's go together, all right? I'll be ready in five minutes. Promise you won't leave the house without me!"

"Yes, mommy!"

"Good boy!"

Alviss pecked him on the cheek and slipped into the corridor; Tangorn could hear her give orders to grumbling Tina.

Congratulations, Baron, he thought gruffly, your beloved will walk you over by the hand to provide security, since you're incapable of even that much.

You've quit the game beaten—not exactly conducive to self-esteem—but if you really do obediently wait for Alviss now, you'll simply lose the right to call yourself a man. And if her premonitions are true, then so much the worse for them. Maybe I'm not worth a copper as a spy, but I'm still the third sword of Gondor. I have the *Slumber-maker* and the *mithril* coat, should you guys want to risk it. Let your heads be my consolation prize, I'm quite in the mood for that . . . Damn! He almost laughed. Looks like I'm beginning to treat female premonitions seriously . . .

He scanned the empty garden, which was in full view from the second floor, then the empty Jasper street with the DSD man in police uniform. Guard cobras in Chakti-Vari's store—so what? Feet over the windowsill, he thought fleetingly that he'd better spring clear of the flower bed, lest Alviss chew his head off over her favorite nasturtiums.

Alviss was almost ready to go when she caught a movement in the garden in the corner of her eye. Her heart lurched; she sprang to the window and beheld Tangorn on the garden path. Blowing her a kiss, he went towards the door. Whispering a few choice expressions better fitting her port youth than current status, Alviss observed, with some relief, that the baron was armed and that his stance showed caution rather than undue attention to the beauty of the summer morning. He went through the door watchfully, crossed the street, exchanged a few words with the policeman and stretched his hand towards the brass knocker on the jewelry shop door . . .

"Ta-a-a-a-n!!!" Her desperate scream shattered the silence.

Too late.

The policeman raised a hand to his mouth, and the next moment the baron sagged to the ground, clutching his throat convulsively.

When she ran into the street the 'policeman' was long gone, and Tangorn was living the last seconds of his life. The poisoned thorn spat from an *ulshitan*[75]—a small tube used by Far Harad pygmies—struck him in the neck, a finger's width above the *mithril* mail; the third sword of Gondor had no time to even draw the *Slumber-maker*. Alviss tried to lift him; the baron clutched her arms in a death grip and breathed hoarsely: "Tell . . . Faramir . . . un . . . done . . ."; he tried to say something else, but lacked the air to do it: the alkaloids of the *anchar*[76] tree on which the pygmies' poison is based paralyze

the respiratory muscles. The baron failed both to complete his mission and to let his friends know about it; he died with that thought.

A man nicknamed Ferryman, a 'clean-up man' from Elandar's organization, observed the scene from a nearby attic through a cobwebbed hole in the roof. He put his crossbow down, at a loss to figure out who beat him to it so neatly. DSD? Too tidy for 12 Shore Street . . .

What if this is another of the baron's tricks? Maybe he should plink him with a bolt, just to be sure?

By that time Mongoose had already shed his police uniform, becoming once again a duly accredited ambassador of His Majesty the Sultan Sagul the Fifth the Pious, the mighty ruler of non-existent Florissant Islands. He was moving briskly but without undue haste towards the port, where a previously chartered felucca named *Trepang* was waiting for him. The battle of the two lieutenants had ended the way it had to end, because a professional differs from an amateur in that he plays not until he has scored a beautiful goal or until he has a psychological crisis, but rather until the sixtieth second of the last minute of the game. By the way, that sixtieth second occurred at the port, where Mongoose had another chance to demonstrate his high degree of professionalism. He himself probably would have been unable to say exactly what it was about the *Trepang*'s crew that alerted him, but he turned to the skipper as the man stepped on the ramp after him, as if to ask a question, hit him in the throat with the edge of his palm and jumped into the rusty, oily water between the pier and the ship. The two seconds he gained thereby were enough to get a little green pill from behind his collar and swallow it, so Jacuzzi's operatives only captured another unidentified corpse (the fourth that day). The game that the special command from Task Force Féanor played with the Umbarian Secret Service ended in a draw, nil-nil.

. . . Petrified with grief, Alviss held dying Tangorn in her arms. He would never find out the most important part: it was his death at the hands of the Secret Guard that settled Elandar's last doubts, so that same evening his package started north, to Lórien, via routes unknown to any man. Nor was he to know that Alviss heard his last choking whisper as "tell Faramir: done!" and would do everything properly . . . And the certain Someone tirelessly knitting a gorgeous tapestry we call History out of invisible coincidences and rather visible human weaknesses immediately put the entire episode out of His mind: a gambit is a gambit, sacrifice a piece to win the game, and that's all

there is to it . . .

PART IV

Ransom for a Shadow

Over and over the story, ending as he began:
"Make ye no truce with Adam-zad—the Bear that walks like a Man!"[77]
Rudyard Kipling

CHAPTER 55

Mirkwood, near Dol-Guldur

June 5, 3019

"That's a fresh print, very fresh . . ." Runcorn mumbled under his breath. He dropped to one knee and, without looking back, signaled Haladdin who was walking some fifteen yards behind to get off the path. Tzerlag, who brought up the rear, overtook the obediently yielding doctor, and now both sergeants were engaged in an elaborate scout ritual by a small spot of wet clay, trading quiet phrases in Common. Haladdin's opinion did not interest the rangers at all, of course; not even the Orocuen's thoughts counted for much in that discussion: the scouts have already worked out a pecking order. The erstwhile enemies—the Ithilien ranger and the platoon leader of the Cirith Ungol Rangers—treated each other with exaggerated respect (like, for example, a master goldsmith and a master swordsmith might), but the desert is the desert, and the forest is the forest. Both professionals knew the limits of their expertise very well. The Ithilien ranger had spent his entire life in these forests.

. . . Back then he still walked upright and with shoulders squared (the right one was not yet higher than the left one), while his face was yet free of a badly healed purple scar; he was handsome, brave, and lucky, with his bottle-green Royal Forester uniform fitting him like a glove—in other words, a serious threat to womankind. The local peasants disliked him, which he considered normal: villeins only like accommodating foresters, whereas Runcorn took his service with all the seriousness of youth. Being a King's man, he could disregard the local landlords; he quickly put their courts, which used to visit the royal forests like their own larder under his predecessor, in their

place. Everybody knew the story of Eggy the Chicken Hawk's band that had wandered into their country once—Runcorn did away with those guys all by himself, not deigning to wait for the sheriff's men to pry their behinds off the benches of the Three Pint Tavern. To sum it up, the neighbors treated the young forester with cautious respect but not much sympathy, which he did not care much for anyway. He was used to being by himself since he was a child, and socialized with the Forest way more than with his peers. The Forest was everything to him: playmate, interlocutor, mentor, eventually becoming his Home. Some people even claimed that he had in him the blood of the *woodwoses*—forest demons from the ominous Druadan Dell. Well, people in remote forest villages say all sorts of things during chilly fall evenings, when only the feeble light of a splinter keeps the ancient evils from getting out of the dark corners . . .

To top it all off, at one point Runcorn stopped showing up at village festivities (to acute disappointment of all eligible maidens in the vicinity) and instead hung out at a tumbledown shack at the edge of Druadan, where an old medicine woman from the far north (maybe as far as Angmar) had settled some time before with her granddaughter Lianica. Manwe only knows what such an eligible bachelor saw in that puny freckled girl; many supposed that witchcraft was involved—the old woman certainly knew some spells and could heal with herbs and laying of hands, which was her livelihood. Lianica was known to talk to birds and beasts in their language and could have a ferret and a mouse sit together in the palm of her hand. This rumor may have owed to the fact that she avoided people (as opposed to forest animals) so much that she was originally thought to be dumb. The local beauties, when someone would mention the forester's strange choice, only snorted: "Whatever. Maybe they'll make a good couple."

It did look like they would have, but it was not to be. One day the girl ran into the young landlord, out with his company to hunt and 'improve the serfs' blood line a bit;' those exploits of his have even caused some of his neighboring landlords to grumble: "Really, young sir, this propensity of yours to screw everything that moves . . ." It was a routine matter, nothing to get excited about, really. Who'd've thought that the fool girl would drown herself, as if something precious had been taken away from her? No, guys, it really is true that all northerners are nuts.

Runcorn buried Lianica alone—the old woman could not bear the loss of her granddaughter and passed away two days later without

regaining consciousness. The neighbors came to the cemetery mostly to check whether the forester would put a black-feathered arrow on the grave, signifying an oath of vengeance. But no, he did not risk that. Nor was that a surprise; sure, he's the King's man, but the King is far, while the landlord's company (eighteen thugs, gallows material all) is right here. Still, the guy turned out to be weaker than we first thought . . . So did those villagers who bet on Runcorn's vengeance (two- or even three-to-one) grumble in the Three Pint Tavern, sourly counting out the coins they have lost onto the sticky tables.

However, the young lord was of a different opinion—he was exceedingly prudent in all matters that did not involve his passion for 'pink meat.' The forester did not strike him as a man who would either let such a thing pass or go to court and write petitions (which amounted to the same thing). That sprightly peasant girl upon whom he bestowed his favor in the forest despite her objections (damn, the bitten finger still hurts) . . . To be honest, had he known that a man such as Runcorn was courting her, he would've simply passed by, especially seeing as the girl turned out to be nothing much. But what's done is done.

Comparing his impressions with those of the company leader, the landlord knew that the absence of a black arrow meant only that Runcorn was not one for theatrical gestures and cared little for the gawkers' opinions. A serious man who needed to be dealt with seriously . . . That same night the forester's house was set afire from all four sides. The arsonists propped the door shut with a large beam; when a man's shadow appeared in the fire-lit attic window, arrows flew from the darkness below; after that, no one tried to escape the burning hut.

A King's forester burned alive was no stinking serf that managed to get run over by a landlord's horse; no cover-up was possible. Although . . .

"Everybody here thinks it was the poachers, sir. The late forester, gods rest his soul, was real hard on them, so they struck back. A really sad story . . . More wine?" The young landlord addressed those words to the court's magister from Harlond, who had stopped at his hospitable manor.

"Yes, please! A wonderful claret, haven't had its like for a while," the magister, a dumpy sleepy old man with a nimbus of silver hair around a pink bald spot, nodded courtly. For a long time he admired the flames in the fireplace through the wine in a thin Umbarian glass,

and then raised his faded blue eyes—piercing icicles, not sleepy at all—at his host.

"By the way, that drowned girl—one of your serfs?"

"What drowned girl?"

"Why, do they drown themselves every other day here?"

"Oh, that one . . . No, she was from the north somewhere. Is it important?"

"Maybe, maybe not." The magister again raised the glass to eye level and said thoughtfully:

"Your estate, young sir, is very well-kept—an example for all landlords in this area. I figure at least two and a half hundred marks in annual rents, right?"

"A hundred fifty," the landlord lied smoothly and caught his breath: praise Eru, the conversation is turning to real business. "About a half goes to taxes, plus there're the mortgages . . ."

Poachers, you say? All right, poachers it is. A suitable candidate was soon found; after some time on a rack above a censer the man made the appropriate confession and was duly impaled on a stake, as a lesson to the other serfs. The court magister departed to town, tenderly hugging to his side a money bag with a hundred eighty silver marks . . . All set?

Right!..

From the very beginning the landlord was troubled by the absence of any bones in the rubble of Runcorn's house. The company leader, who had personally commanded that operation, tried to calm his boss down: the house was large, with a wooden rather than earthen floor, the fire had burned for more than an hour, so the corpse must have burned to cinders, this does happen often. However, the young lord, being (as already mentioned) prudent beyond his years in nearly all matters, ordered his men to examine the location once again. His worst suspicions came true: the forester, who had had his share of surprises, was prudent, too, with a thirty-yard tunnel leading from the basement outside. There were a few fresh blood spots on the tunnel floor—one of the arrows had found its mark that night.

"Find him!" the young lord ordered—quietly, but in a tone of voice that made his hastily assembled henchmen break out in goose bumps. "It's us or him, no going back. So far, Oromë be praised, he's licking his wounds somewhere in the forest. If he escapes, I'm a dead man, but you will all die before me, I promise."

The landlord took personal charge of the hunt, declaring that he

would not rest until he sees Runcorn's corpse with his own eyes. The fugitive's tracks led inside the forest and were clearly readable throughout the day; the man had not bothered to conceal them, apparently assuming that he was believed dead. Closer to evening the company leader found a cocked crossbow hidden in the bushes by the path; more precisely, the crossbow was found later, after its bolt had already buried itself in the leader's gut. While the henchmen bickered around the wounded man, another arrow whistled in from somewhere, taking a man in the neck. Runcorn gave himself away thereby—his silhouette showed briefly between the trees some thirty yards away down the dale, and they all chased him down a narrow clearing between the bushes. That was the idea: to get them all to run without looking down. As a result, three men wound up in the pit, more than he expected. Eggy the Chicken Hawk's bandits have crafted it with skill and care: eight feet deep with sharp stakes at the bottom, smeared with rotten meat to guarantee a blood poisoning at the very least.

Twilight fell, and the gloom deepened. The landlord's men were very cautious now, moving along in pairs; when they finally spotted Runcorn in the bushes, they showered him with arrows from twenty yards away. Alas, when they approached (right in the path of a five-hundred-pound log that dropped from a nearby tree), they found only a roll of bark dressed in some rags. Only then did the landlord realize that even just getting away from Eggy's forest stronghold where this damned *wos* had so expertly lured them would be very difficult: the night forest around them was chock-full of deadly traps, and their four wounded (not to mention two dead) have robbed their company of mobility. Another thing he understood now was that their overwhelming numerical superiority was of no consequence in this situation and the role of prey was theirs at least until dawn.

CHAPTER 56

They set up a defense perimeter in a worst possible location—an overgrown dale with zero visibility—because moving elsewhere was even more dangerous. There was not even a suggestion to light a fire, they were afraid to even talk, much less expose themselves to light.

Even the wounded had to be tended to in pitch-black darkness. Gripping their bows and swords, the lord's men stared and listened to the moonless night, firing at every rustle and every suggestion of movement in the fog rising from rotting leaves. It ended with someone losing his cool at about two in the morning: the idiot yelled "*Woses*!" and sank an arrow into his neighbor, who had just gotten up to stretch his numb legs; then he ran inside the perimeter, crashing through the bushes. The worst thing that can happen in a nightly battle happened then: the perimeter fell apart and everyone ran around in the dark shooting at everybody else, every man for himself.

This was no accident, though: the 'someone' who caused the free-for-all with a shot at his comrade was none other than Runcorn. The forester had appropriated the cloak of one of the dead (who were left unguarded), blended in with the lord's men as they were setting up their defense, and waited. He certainly had a hundred opportunities to put an arrow into the landlord and vanish into darkness in the ensuing chaos—but in his judgment the man did not deserve such an easy death, so he had other plans.

Only at dawn did the outcome of the fight become clear to the hapless hunters—they lost two more men and the landlord himself vanished without a trace. Supposing that he got lost in the night scuffle and secreted himself in the dark (which is the correct solution: only a total idiot would run headlong through the night forest; a thinking person would hide quietly under a bush until someone trips over him), the fighters started combing the forest, calling on their lord. They found him a couple of miles away, guided by the cackling of crows.

The young lord was tied to a tree, his genitals sticking out of his mouth—"choked on his balls," as the serfs later said in relish.

The entire local population joined in the hunt for the evildoer with gusto, but they might as well have been trying to capture an echo. The former royal forester's career had only one possible direction now—a life of robbery and death at the hands of the law. Wounded in a fight with the sheriff of Harlond's men, broken on the rack, Runcorn was about to grace the local gallows when Baron Grager rode into town looking to recruit reinforcements for the decimated Ithilien regiment. "I'll take this one," said the baron in approximately the tone of a housewife picking out a cut of ham at the butcher's (". . . and slice it thin!"); the sheriff could only grit his teeth.

The war beyond Osgiliath was going so-so; the Ithilien regiment fought noticeably better than any other unit and, as is customary, was the last one to be replenished. In general reinforcements were hard to come by (the folks at Minas Tirith who screamed the loudest about the 'need to free Middle Earth from the eastern darkness once and for all' have all suddenly developed pressing business on this side of the Anduin, whereas the plain folk never cared for the War of the Ring to begin with), so the special dispensation that Faramir had bargained for—'even right off the gallows'—had to be used quite frequently. Grager himself was walking in the gallows' shadow, but the reach of the courts of Gondor was too short to grab a front-line officer in wartime.

The regiment's physician had to expend a mountain of effort to turn the bag of bones Grager had extracted from the Harlond jail into a semblance of a man, but the famous robber was worth it. Runcorn could not shoot a bow like he used to (his mangled shoulder joint had forever lost flexibility), but he remained an excellent scout, and his experience with traps and other forest warfare tricks was truly priceless. He finished the war with the rank of sergeant, then participated under his lieutenant's command in freeing and elevating Faramir to the throne of Ithilien, and was just about to start building himself a home—somewhere far from people, in the Otter Creek dell, say—when His Highness the Prince of Ithilien invited him over. Would he kindly agree to accompany two of his guests north, to Mirkwood?

"I'm no longer in service, my Captain, and charity is not my business." "That's exactly what I need—a man not in my service. Nor is this charity, they're prepared to pay well.

Name your price, Sergeant." "Forty silver marks," Runcorn said out of the blue, just to get them off his back. But the wiry hook-nosed Orc (who seemed to be the leader) only nodded:

"Done," and undid the money bag with Elvish embroidery. When a handful of assorted gold coins appeared on the table (Haladdin had long wondered where Eloar might have gotten the Vendotenian nyanmas or the square chengas from the Noon Islands), the ranger could no longer back out gracefully.

Runcorn took responsibility for all preparations for the trip to Dol Guldur, so Haladdin and Tzerlag enjoyed a total lack thereof. The scout tried the leather *ichigas*[78] bought for them with obvious anxiety (the Orocuen did not trust any footwear without a hard sole), but he really liked the *ponyagas*[79] the locals used instead of rucksacks. These rigid frames of two bird-cherry arcs conjoined at a straight angle (the wood is bent right after cutting and becomes bone-hard when it dries) allow one to carry a lumpy hundred-pound load without worrying about fitting it to one's back.

To the doctor's mild surprise the Orocuen decided to move from Emyn Arnen's guest quarters where the prince had put them to the barrack of Faramir's personal guard for the duration. "I'm a simple man, sir, I'm like a fly in honey amidst all this luxury. It's bad for the fly and bad for the honey." He showed up at breakfast the next day sporting a large shiner but quite pleased with himself. It turned out that the Ithilienians, who had heard tell of the sergeant's exploits on the night of the prince's escape, prodded him into challenging the two best hand-to-hand fighters they had. Tzerlag won one fight and lost (or, perhaps, had the smarts to lose) the other to complete satisfaction of all involved. Now even the Orocuen's dislike for beer, uncovered during long evening jaw sessions, met with the rangers' understanding: a competent man within his rights. What's the drink you got over there—*kumiss*?[80] Sorry, man, no deliveries this year . . . One day Haladdin visited the barrack to talk to his companion and noted how a lively conversation in Common died down the moment he showed up and an awkward silence reigned—the learned doctor was nothing but a hindrance to farmers' sons finally free of the necessity to shoot each other, a boss.

Since they did not know who was in charge in the Brown Lands on the left bank of the Anduin, they chose a water route. They sailed all the way to the Falls of Rauros (about two-thirds of the trip), helped by the strong even south wind that blows throughout the valley of the

Great River at that time of year. From there they had to use light dugouts. Haladdin and Tzerlag spent that part of the journey as cargo: “You don’t know the River, so the best you can do for the company is keep your asses glued to the bottom of the boat and make no sudden movements.” On June 2nd the expedition reached the North Undeep, a twist in the river right before the mouth of Limlight river originating from Fangorn. The Enchanted Forests began here—Lórien on the right bank, Mirkwood on the left; that left less than sixty miles to Dol Guldur as the crow flies. Faramir’s men remained behind to guard the boats (on the Rohan bank, just in case), while the three of them reached the jagged black-green wall of Mirkwood firs the next day.

This forest was completely unlike the sun- and life-filled groves of Ithilien: complete absence of undergrowth and bush made it resemble a colonnade of some mammoth temple.

Silence reigned under its ceiling, as a thick carpet of acrid-green moss, dotted here and there by little whitish flowers that resembled potato sprouts, swallowed all sound. This stillness and the greenish twilight made for a perfect illusion of being under water, further enhanced by ‘seaweed’—unappetizing hoary beards of lichen hanging off fir branches. Not a ray of sunlight, not a breath of a breeze—Haladdin physically felt the pressure of a thick sheet of water. The trees were enormous, their true size given away only by the fallen trunks; these were impossible to climb over, so they had to go around them anywhere from a hundred to hundred fifty feet in either direction. Larger patches of storm-felled trees were completely impassable and had to be circumvented. The insides of those trunks were carved out by huge palm-sized ants that fiercely attacked anyone who dared touch their abode. Twice they came across relatively fresh human skeletons; graceful coal-black butterflies swarmed noiselessly over the bones, and this was scary enough for even the jaded Orocuen to make the sign of an Eye.

Packs of werewolves and wheel-sized spiders turned out to be fairy tales: the forest did not deign to actively oppose Man, being absolutely alien to him, like the ocean expanse or the cold fire of Ephel Dúath glaciers; the forest’s power expressed itself in alienation and rejection, rather than confrontation, which is why forester Runcorn felt it most acutely. It was this power that Dol Guldur had been gathering inside its charmed stones over the ages, century after century, drop by drop. The three magic fastnesses—Dol Guldur in Mirkwood, Minas Morgul by the Cirith Ungol pass, and Ag-Jakend amidst the lifeless high

mountain plateau called Shurab in northern Khand—enclosed Mordor in a protective triangle fed by the ancient power of the forest, the light of mountain snow, and the silence of the desert.

The Nazgúl that had erected these magical 'resonators' made them look like fortresses in order to conceal their true purpose; one supposes that they must have had a good laugh watching yet another Western general wander the cracked stones of Dol Guldur's courtyards, trying to locate any sign of a garrison that had just engaged his soldiers. (This trick was last used two months ago: the 'shadow garrison' had distracted the Elves and the Esgaroth militia for almost two weeks, allowing the real North Army to retreat to Morannon almost without casualties.) Only the castle's dungeons were off limits to everyone, protected by clear warnings in Common chiseled into the walls.

. . . The discussion on the path was becoming more protracted. Haladdin took down his *ponyaga* (as usual, the first sensation was an illusion of blissfully floating on air, quickly replaced by the accumulated weariness of the march) and approached the rangers. Both sergeants looked worried: they have been walking paths through deep forest, avoiding the road joining Dol Guldur to Morannon, and yet the scouts constantly felt human presence even in these enchanted thickets. And now this: fresh bootprints of a Mordorian infantryman . . . yet Sharya-Rana had mentioned no Mordorian forces near the fortress.

"Perhaps deserters from the North Army back then?"

"Unlikely . . ." Tzerlag scratched his head. "Any deserter would've fled these parts immediately, anywhere's better than here. This one is stationed somewhere nearby: judging by the depth of the print, he's carrying no load."

"Strange tracks," Runcorn confirmed, "the soldiers of your North Army have to have worn-out boots, but these look like they're fresh from the warehouse. Look how sharp the edge is."

"How do you know that these are Mordorians?"

The scouts traded slightly offended looks. "Well, the height of the heel, the shape of the toe . . ."

"That's not what I mean. Tzerlag and I here are wearing *ichigas*—so what?"

There was a brief silence. "Damn. Yeah, that's true, but why?"

There was, indeed, no sense to it, and the decision Haladdin made suddenly was totally irrational—a stab in the dark. Strictly speaking,

it was not even his decision; rather, some unseen power ordered him to go ahead. When this happens, you either obey or quit the game.

"All right, here's what we'll do. As I understand it, it's less than a dozen miles to Dol Guldur. We will go to the road now, where you will camp and I'll continue to the fortress alone. If I'm not back in three days, I'm dead and you're to go back. Do not approach the fortress under any circumstances. Any circumstances, understand?"

"Are you crazy, sir?" the Orocuen piped up.

"Sergeant Tzerlag," he had never even suspected himself to be capable of such a tone, "do you understand your orders?"

"Yeah . . ." the man hesitated, but only for a second. "Yes, Field Medic Second Class, sir!"

"Wonderful. I need to have some sleep and a good think about what I'm going to tell these guys in brand-new boots, should they be in charge at the fortress. Who I am, where have I been all these months, how did I get here, and all that . . . why I'm shod in *ichigas*—no detail is too small."

CHAPTER 57

Kumai turned the rudder, and the glider hung motionlessly in the sky, resting its widespread wings on empty air with ease and confidence. You could see all of Dol Guldur plainly from here, with all its decorative bastions and battlements, the central donjon (all workshops now), and the thread of the road winding between heather-covered hillocks. He scanned the environs and grinned contentedly: hiding their 'Weapon Monastery' here in the boonies, right under the Lórien Elves' noses, was a brilliantly impudent undertaking. Many of the colleagues gathered under the roof of the magic fortress were unsettled (some had constant nightmares, others developed strange ailments), but Trolls are thick-skinned, phlegmatic, and believe neither dreams nor signs, so the engineer felt great here and worked day and night.

Formally their chief was Jageddin—the famed master of chemistry, optics, and electrical mechanics from the Barad-Dur University—but the real master here was Commandant Grizzly[81], who really did resemble a huge gray bear from the wooded foothills of the Northeast; none of them knew his real name or his rank in the Secret Service. Kumai could not even figure out his race; maybe one of the northern Trolls that used to live in the Misty Mountains before melting into Dungarians and Angmarians?

Kumai met the commandant immediately upon his arrival at the fortress (the Superintendant's people got him there in stages along the Dol Guldur highway—they turned out to have a regular route there, moving convoys almost every other day). Grizzly interrogated him for several hours, going through Kumai's entire life history; about the only thing he did not ask him about were his first girlfriend's sexual tastes. Childhood, school, military service; names, dates, specifications of flying machines, the habits of his university friends, descriptions of supervisors in his father's mines, and the sequence of traditional toasts at Trollish feasts . . . "You say that on the day of your first flight, May

3rd 3014, the sky was overcast. Are you sure?.. What's the name of the bartender at Achigidel Bar, across from the University? Oh yes, right, that bar is a block away down the boulevard . . .

Engineer First Class Shagrat from your regiment—is he tall, hunched over, with a limp?

Oh, stocky and no limp . . .” Any fool could see that this was a verification procedure, but why so thorough? When Kumai mentioned a detail of his escape from Mindolluin, Grizzly made a face: “Didn't they tell you that this is a forbidden topic?”

“But . . .” the engineer was surprised, “I didn't think that this ban applies to you, too . . .”

“Were you told of any exceptions?”

“No . . . Sorry.”

“Get used to it. Very well, you've passed this test. Have some tea.” With those words the commandant moved a large round teapot with a chipped spout and a Khandian tea bowl of finest beige porcelain and unimaginable provenance towards Kumai and got busy studying the list of necessary supplies the mechanic had put together (bamboo, balsa wood, Umbarian sailcloth—a panoply of stuff, no doubt to be augmented later). “By the way, your former colleagues, like Master Mhamsuren . . . would it appreciably help your work to have them here?”

“Of course!.. But is such a thing possible?”

“There's nothing impossible for our Service, but you need to remember everything you can about these people—their looks, distinctive features, friends, relatives, habits. Every little thing helps, so please work your memory.”

Another half an hour later the commandant lightly slapped a stack of fresh handwritten sheets and summarized: “If they're alive, we'll find them,” and Kumai felt with certainty—these guys will.

“Please change, Engineer Second Class.” Grizzly glanced towards a brand-new Mordorian uniform without any insignia (everyone here was dressed that way—Jageddin's scientists, service staff, and the silent Secret Service guards). “I'll show you our physical plant.”

The ‘physical plant’ turned out to be large and diverse. For example, Kumai saw an excellent glider of a type he had never seen before: the ten-yard wings, straight and narrow like an Elvish blade, seemed to stretch over almost nothing—some improbable material, lighter than balsa and stronger than stone chestnut. The ‘soft’ catapult used to launch the glider was a proper match—say what you want,

guys, but there are no such materials in nature! Only then did the mechanic realize that this was the famed *Dragon* of the Nazgúl, whose range was limited only by how long the pilot could stay aloft without a break. Kumai mastered the art of flying the *Dragon* easily—the better a machine is, the easier it is to control.

Four Isengard 'blasting fire' experts arrived at Dol Guldur at about the same time; that was the powder-like incendiary mix resembling that long used in Mordor for festive fireworks.

A short wiry man with slightly bowed legs, named Wolverine and resembling a Dungar mountain man, was the Isengardians' escort; he became Grizzly's stand-in when the commandant had to leave the fortress on his secret business. The Mordorian engineers were skeptical at first: the drop-shaped stubby-winged ceramic jars loaded with 'blasting fire' (soon known as simply *powder*) did have a range of almost two miles, but their accuracy stank—plus or minus two hundred yards. Also, one time a 'flying drop' exploded right in the firing channel, killing a worker who happened to be nearby. After learning from the Isengardians that such things happened—"not all the time, mind you, but yeah, it happens"—the Mordorians traded meaningful looks: to hell with this 'blasting fire,' guys, it's more dangerous to friend than foe.

Yet not three days after the accident the catapult drivers asked Grizzly to attend a test firing of a new kind of shell. The first shot from the usual three hundred yards blew eight targets to shreds; the new shell was just a hollow ceramic ball filled with *powder* and cut-up nails, set off with a fire cord used for naphtha bombs. The next step was obvious: put the jar of *powder* inside a larger one filled with *fire jelly*[82], which you get by dissolving soap in the lighter fraction of naphtha, so that the explosion flings sticky incendiary fluff in all directions. Grizzly examined the thirty-yard circle of earth scorched down to the mineral layer and turned to Jageddin in amazement: "All that done by a single jar? Congratulations, guys: finally you've come up with something worthwhile!"

That was when Kumai had the thought that one could not only sling such shells—whether incendiary or shrapnel ones—from catapults, but also drop them from gliders. "This makes no sense," was the objection, "how many sorties can you fly during a battle? Two? Three?

It's not worth it." "Yes, sure, if all you do is simply drop shells anywhere on the enemy's army. But if you hit milord Aragorn together with milord Mithrandir, it's quite worthwhile." "You think you can hit

them?" "Sure, why not? Rather than hit a man, I'd have to hit within fifteen yards of a man." "Isn't that kinda . . . you know . . . ignoble?"

"Wha-a-a-at?!" "No, nothing . . . The old knightly wars—'are you ready, fair sir?'—are anyway all done with. As the One is my witness, we didn't start this."

It did look like the 'noble war' was to be no more. For example, the Mordorian engineers have made serious strides in improving the crossbow—the weapon that had always been under an unspoken ban in Middle Earth. ("Why do you think the noble knights hate the crossbow so much? It looks personal, doesn't it?" "Sure, we've all heard it: a distance weapon is a coward's weapon." "No, man, this is more complicated. Note that no one objects to bows much. The thing is that the best bow develops at most a hundred force-pounds at the bowstring, while a crossbow does a thousand." "So what?" "So an archer can only bring down an armored knight if he hits him in the visor or an armor joint, which is a high art—you gotta start learning at three and maybe you'll be some good by the age of twenty. Whereas a crossbowman just shoots at the target and the bolt goes right through wherever it hits. Which means that after a month's training a fifteen-year-old journeyman who's never held a weapon before can wipe his nose on his sleeve, take aim from a hundred yards, and goodbye to the famed Baron N, winner of forty-two tournaments, and so forth . . .

You know how they say in Umbar: the One created weak and strong people, and the inventor of the crossbow made them equal? So now these strong people are mad at the demise of the high art of combat!" "Yep. What's more, the taxed estates are beginning to scratch their heads: what do we need all those fancy boys for, with all their coats of arms, plumages, and all the rest? If it's to protect the Motherland, perhaps crossbowmen will be cheaper?" "You're so down-to-earth practical, brother!" "I guess I am. Plus I'm too dumb to figure out why it's noble to knock someone's brains out with a sword but dishonorable to do it with a crossbow bolt.")

But the steel crossbows with 'distance glasses,' the 'flying drops,' even incendiary shells dropped from the sky paled next to their unseen commanders' recent demand via Grizzly: there are several well-known gorges in the Misty Mountains where cracks in the rocks emit a fog that quickly dissipates into still air. The few who managed to escape these gorges told that the moment you breathe this fog you taste a revolting sweetness, and then drowsiness hits you like an

avalanche. The myriad animal skeletons littering the slopes testify to how this drowsiness ends. You're supposed to find a way to direct such fog at the enemy.

Kumai was a man of discipline, but this idea made him nauseous: to poison the very air—some weapon of vengeance![83] Thank the One that he's a mechanic rather than a chemist and will not have to be involved in this particular project.

. . . He dropped two large stones from a hundred feet (same weight as the explosive shells; they hit right next to the targets) and set the glider down right on the highway about a mile and a half from Dol Guldur, near where the road emptied into the gloomy canyon it had washed through Mirkwood after cutting through the sickly ruddiness of the heather expanses like a white scar. He got out of the cockpit and sat on the side of the road, glancing impatiently in the direction of the fortress. Soon someone will be here with the horses, and he'll attempt to launch the *Dragon* right from the ground, towed by a brace of horses, like they used to do with the old gliders. Where're those guys already?..

Since Kumai was mostly looking towards Dol Guldur, he only saw the man walking the road from the direction of Mirkwood when he was about thirty yards away. Looking at the newcomer, the Troll first shook his head: no way! Then he sprinted towards the man head over heels and had him in a bear hug a moment later.

"Easy, big guy, you'll break my ribs!"

"I have to know if you're a ghost!.. When did they find you?"

"A while ago. Listen, first things first: Sonya is alive and well, she's with the Resistance in the Ash Mountains . . ."

Haladdin listened to Kumai's tale, staring at the busy milling of the earth bees over the heather flowers. Yeah, abandoned ruins with real hiding places, far from human habitation, where a normal person would never go . . . leave it to the Nazgúl to hide a *palantír* in such a hornet's nest. I'm really lucky to have been intercepted before I had the chance to foist my clumsy story on a couple of intelligence professionals. I can't tell Grizzly and Wolverine the truth, either. Just imagine this picture. Some field medic, second class, shows up at their super-extra-secret Weapon Monastery: hi, guys, I'm only here to pick up a *palantír* and go right back to Prince Faramir in Ithilien. I'm working for the Order of the Nazgúl, but the one who empowered me died on the spot, so no one can corroborate this fact. I can show you a Nazgúl ring as proof, but it's magic-free . . . Yeah, a real pretty

picture. They'll probably peg me as a psycho, not even a spy. They'll probably let me into the castle (poison experts aren't common) but they won't let me out—I myself wouldn't have . . . Hey, wait a minute!..

"Halik, wake up! You all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right, sorry. I just had an idea. You see, I'm here on a special mission that has nothing to do with your Weapon Monastery . . . Have you ever heard of these rings?"

Kumai weighed the ring on his palm and whistled respectfully. "Inoceramium?"

"The same."

"Do you mean to say . . ."

"I do. Engineer Second Class Kumai!"

"Sir!"

"In the name of the Order of the Nazgúl, will you follow my orders?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mind that your superiors in Dol Guldur must not know anything about this."

"Do you realize what you're saying?!"

"Kumai, my friend . . . I have no right to tell you what this is about, but I swear by everything that's dear, I swear by Sonya's life: this is the only thing that can still save our Middle Earth.

It's your choice. If I come to Grizzly, he'll surely want to verify my credentials. It'll be weeks if not months while his superiors contact mine, and in the meantime it will be all over. You think the Nazgúl are all-powerful? Like hell! They didn't even tell me about these Secret Service games at Dol Guldur, most likely because they themselves didn't know."

"Yeah, that's no wonder," Kumai grumbled. "When you add secrecy to our usual chaos, there's no verifying anything."

"So will you do it?"

"I will."

"Then listen and remember. There's a fireplace in the Great Hall which has a six-sided stone in its rear wall . . ."

CHAPTER 58

Ithilien, Emyn Arnen

July 12, 3019

There's no harder work than waiting—this saying might as well be cast in bronze for its resistance to wear. It is even harder when waiting is your only work after everything else possible had been done and you only have to wait for the curtain signal—and wait and wait, day in and day out, for a signal that may never come at all, for this is already outside your control, with other Powers in charge.

Involuntarily idle at Emyn Arnen after his Dol Guldur trip, Haladdin caught himself sincerely envying Tangorn at his deadly game in Umbar: even risking your life every day is better than such waiting. How did he curse himself for these thoughts when a week ago haggard Faramir handed him the *mithril* coat: ". . . his last words were: 'done.'"

Their return from Dol Guldur also came to his mind frequently. This time they failed to sneak through: the fighters from Mordorian intelligence that were guarding the paths through Mirkwood against the Elves had picked up their scent and followed them inexorably, like wolves follow a wounded deer. Now he knows the exact price of his life: forty silver marks that he paid Runcorn; if not for the ranger's skill, they would have most certainly stayed in Mirkwood to feed the black butterflies. They ran into a trap on the shore of Anduin; when arrows flew, it was too late to yell: "Guys, we're friendlies from a different service!" Back there he had shot poisoned Elvish arrows at his own people, and there's no cleansing from that . . .

Do you know what the saddest thing is, dear Dr. Haladdin? You're now bound with blood and have lost the right to choose, the One's biggest gift. You'll now be forever haunted by the young men in

Mordorian uniforms without insignia who fell in the reeds by the Anduin, and by Tangorn, sent to certain death. Now, the moment you drop the quest you'll be nothing but a murderer and a traitor. You have to win to make these sacrifices worthwhile, but in order to win you have to walk over corpses and wade through unthinkable muck, again and again—a vicious circle. And the most horrid job is still ahead of you; that you'll be doing it with another's hands—those of Baron Grager—makes no difference. What was it Tangorn had said back then? "An honest division of labor: clean hands for the mastermind, clean conscience for the executor."[84] Like hell . . .

(Tangorn ran a grand rehearsal of the key scene before he left for Umbar and concluded dispassionately: "This won't work. You give yourself away by every look and the very tone of your voice. One can tell that you're lying from a mile away without being an Elf, who are a lot more perceptive than we are. Forgive me—I should've realized right away that you're incapable of doing this. Even if they swallow my bait in Umbar you won't be able to angle the fish here."

"I will—I have to."

"No. Please don't argue, I won't be able to do it, either. It's not enough to have nerves of steel to play this part convincingly knowing the full background; one has to be not even a bastard, but completely inhuman."

"Thank you, sir."

"Not at all, sir. Maybe you can become inhuman in time, but we have no time. The only solution is to use a cutout."

"Use a what?"

"It's our jargon. We need to involve an agent in the dark . . . sorry. In other words, the agent—an intermediary—has to believe that he's telling the truth. Given who we're dealing with, he has to be a top-notch professional."

"You mean Baron Grager?"

"Hmm . . . As your sergeant would say: you get it, doc."

"Under what pretext can we involve him?"

"The pretext is that we're afraid that during negotiations the Elves will break into your brains with their magic or whatnot and turn the exchange into a robbery. Which is totally true, by the way. Plus it will be a little easier for you if you share this crock of shit with the baron. As the famous Su Vey Go used to say: 'An honest division of labor: clean hands for the mastermind, clean conscience for the executor.'"

"Who was this Su Vey Go?"

“A spy, who else?”

. . . The fish bit by the end of the eighty-third day of the hundred he had been allotted. The last rays of the setting sun pierced the echoing space of the Knights Hall, empty at this hour, casting orange spots on its far wall; the spots looked live and warm, seemingly trying to jump off the wall onto the face and hands of a slender girl in dusty man’s clothes, who chose to sit in Faramir’s armchair. She does look like a girl, Grager thought, although by human standards she looks about thirty, whereas it’s scary to even think about her real age. To say that she’s beautiful is to say nothing; one can describe great Alvendi’s *Portrait of a Lovely Stranger* in police search order terms, but should one? Interestingly, Doctor Haladdin predicted the identity and rank of the respondent like a lunar eclipse—truly excellent work—but didn’t seem at all happy about it; I wonder why?..

“Milady Eornis, on behalf of the Prince of Ithilien I welcome you to Emyn Arnen. I’m Baron Grager; perhaps you’ve heard of me?”

“Oh yes.”

“Did Elandar send you Baron Tangorn’s message?” Eornis nodded, took out a simple silver ring covered with scuffed Elvish runes from some secret pocket and put it on the table before Grager.

“This was one of the rings in the seals of your package. It belonged to my son Eloar, who’s missing in action. You know something about his fate . . . did I understand your message correctly, Baron?”

CHAPTER 59

"Yes, milady, you did understand correctly. Let me dot the 'i's first: like my dead friend, I'm only an intermediary. There may be ways to search my brains with Elvish magic, but you won't find anything there beyond what I'm about to tell you."

"You all exaggerate Elvish powers . . ."

"So much the better. Anyway, your son is alive and in captivity. He will be returned to you once we agree on the price."

"Oh, anything, anything at all—precious gems, Gondolin weapons, magic scrolls . . ."

"Alas, milady, his captors are not hostage-trading southern *mashtangs*—they seem to be of Mordor's intelligence service."

Her expression did not change, but her thin fingers went white in their grip on the armchair:

"I will not betray my people for my son's life!"

"Don't you even want to know how little you'd have to do?"

After an eternity that lasted a couple of seconds she answered "I do," and Grager, the veteran of a hundred recruitments, knew that the game was his—all that was left was the endgame, with an extra piece.

"Some preliminary explanations first. Eloar separated from his squad and got lost in the desert. He was dying of thirst when he was discovered, so the Mordorian insurgents saved his life first . . ."

"Saved his life? Those monsters?"

"Please, milady—all these stories about smoked human meat might impress the Shire yokels, but not me. I've fought the Orcs for four years and know the score: these guys have always admired brave foes and treated prisoners well—that's a fact. The problem is that they've found out that your Eloar had participated in so-called mop-ups—that's a euphemism for mass murders of civilians."

"But that's a lie!"

"Unfortunately, it's an honest truth," Grager sighed tiredly. "It so happened that my late friend Baron Tangorn observed the work of

Eloar's Easterlings. I will spare your maternal feelings by not describing what he witnessed."

"It's some horrible mistake, I swear! My boy . . . Wait, did you just say 'Easterlings?'

Perhaps he simply couldn't restrain those savages . . ."

"Milady Eornis, a commander is as responsible for the actions of his subordinates as for his own. That's how it is with Men, don't know about Elves. Anyway, I'm only telling you this so that you understand that should we fail to agree on the price of his release, your son can't place his hopes in the Convention on prisoners of war. He'll be simply turned over to those whose relatives got 'mopped up.'"

"What . . ." she swallowed convulsively, "what do I have to do?"

"First I'd like to clarify your position in Lórien's hierarchy."

"Don't they know it?"

"They do, but only from Eloar, who may have been simply trying to impress them with his hostage value. They need to know how powerful you are: *clofoel* is a rank rather than a position, right? If you do unimportant things like bringing up princes or supervising ceremonies, they see no reason to deal with you."

"I am the *clofoel* of the World."

"Aha . . . meaning that in the Lady's cabinet you're in charge of diplomacy, intelligence, and, more broadly, Elvish expansion in Middle Earth?"

"Yes, you can put it that way. Are you satisfied with the extent of my power?"

"Yes, quite. To business, then. There's a certain Mordorian prisoner of war in one of the Gondorian labor camps controlled by the Elves. You set up his escape and get your son back in exchange, that's all. I do believe that you can put your conscience at ease as far as 'betraying your people' is concerned."

"That's because Lórien would never agree to such an exchange, since the prisoner is one of the royal dynasty of Mordor?"

"I will not comment on your guess, milady Eornis, since I don't know myself. You're right about one thing: should anyone in Lórien find out about our contact, it will cost both you and your son your heads."

"Very well, I agree . . . But first I need to make sure that Eloar is, indeed, alive; the ring could've come from a corpse."

"Fair enough; please examine this note." (This was a key moment, although Grager did not know that. But Haladdin, had he the chance

to see the stony-faced Elf-woman reading the jagged, as if scratched by a drunk, runes: *dear mother I'm alive they treat me well*—would have known right away that Maestro Haddami's lengthy 'getting into character' process had not let them down.)

"What had these beasts done to him?!"

Grager opened his hands. "They say that he's being kept in an underground prison, which isn't exactly the groves of Lórien. So he's not in the best shape."

"What had they done to him?" she repeated quietly. "I won't lift a finger until I have guarantees, you hear? I'll turn all the labor camps upside down and . . ."

"You'll get your guarantees, don't worry. They haven't started the whole thing with setting up a secret meeting to blow the prisoner exchange, right? They've even offered . . ." Grager made a dramatic pause. "Would you like to see him?"

"Is he here?!"

"No, that'd be asking too much. You can talk to him through Seeing Stones. At the time and day we agree upon—say, noon of August first, all right?—Eloar will look into the Mordorian *palantír* while you look into yours."

Eornis shook her head. "We don't have Seeing Stones in Lórien."

Grager nodded. "They're aware of that. To speed things up they've offered to lend you one of theirs. You'll return it with the prisoner—what else could you do? But they, too, demand guarantees: there are ways to locate one *palantír* via another—you Elves should know them better than me—and they're not about to reveal their location to the enemy. Therefore, there are two non-negotiable conditions. First, the *palantír* you get will be blinded by an impenetrable sack and put into 'receive' mode . . . forgive me, milady, I don't understand any of this, I'm just parroting their instructions. So, you will take the *palantír* out of the sack and set it to 'two-way' mode only precisely at noon on August first. Should you dare do it earlier—to see how things are in Mordorian hideouts—then one of the things you'll see will be Eloar's execution. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Second, they demand that during this communication you must be far from Mordor, in Lórien. Therefore, on August first, when your *palantír* starts sending, they want to see in it something that can only be in Lórien . . . You know, at that point they've gotten really paranoid and we've spent almost half an hour figuring out some

Lórien landmark that can't be faked or mistaken for something else. Then someone remembered that your Lady has a huge magic crystal that shows the future; that's just what we need, they said."

"Galadriel's Mirror?!"

"They called it something else, but I'm sure you know what they're talking about."

"They have to be crazy! It's unbelievably difficult to get access to the Lady's Mirror."

"Why crazy? That's exactly what they've said: this will be her chance to prove her position in the hierarchy . . . So: on August first, at noon, you will take the *palantír* out of the sack and switch it from 'receive' to 'two-way' mode, and over in Mordor they will see Galadriel's Mirror; then you'll see your son, alive and well . . . relatively well, anyway. Then they'll tell you who has to be rescued from which camp. All further communication will be conducted via the *palantíri*. Any objections?"

"This won't work for us," she said suddenly in a hollow voice; he immediately noted this 'us'—everything's going smoothly.

"What's the problem?"

"No magical objects may be brought into Lórien without the knowledge of the Star Council.

The *palantíri* are charged with very powerful magic, so I won't be able to smuggle one past the border guard."

"They've heard of this ban, but does it apply even to a *clofoel* of the World?"

She smiled crookedly. "You don't fully know Elvish customs. The ban applies to everyone, including both Sovereigns. The border guard obeys the *clofoel* of Tranquility and no one else."

"Well, if the border guard are the only hitch, I'm glad to solve this small problem that you think insurmountable," Grager said with calculated casualness. "The *palantír* will be smuggled to you directly in your capital, Caras Galadhon."

"In Caras Galadhon?" she froze in amazement and Grager felt with his very gut that something was off.

You're afraid, he realized, for the first time during this conversation you're actually afraid.

Why now, all of a sudden? Of course, learning that right in your own capital enemy spies can do things that you, an all-powerful royal minister, can't do, has to be a shock. But the main thing is that this turn was a surprise to you, meaning that you have more or less

anticipated the rest of our conversation after receiving Eloar's ring . . . anticipated and set up a counter-game, which means that everything you've fed me so far was what you wanted me to believe, rather than your real feelings. I should've figured it out before: you broke and agreed to be recruited way too easily, and you had to know that this is a recruitment and you'll be on the hook for the rest of your life—after all, we're colleagues, in a manner of speaking . . . Sure, her son is in enemy's hands and at risk of a grisly death, but still, she's a courtier, which means she had to go through a helluva lot of intrigue and betrayal on her way to the *clofoel'* s chair, or whatever they sit on at that Star Council of theirs. It's Haladdin's decision, of course, but in his place I wouldn't have trusted her with a penknife, much less a *palantír*. Betcha she'll cheat the learned doctor like a little kid during the exchange. Then again, maybe she won't . . . meaning she won't be able to. The guy has his own aces up his sleeve: I've no idea how he's going to get that crystal over to her in the Enchanted Forest, secretly, but I'm certain he's not bluffing."

"You've heard correctly, milady, in Caras Galadhon. You're in charge of the Festival of the Dancing Fireflies this year, correct?"

CHAPTER 60

Lórien [85] , Caras Galadhon

Night of July 22, 3019

The Elves consider the Festival of the Dancing Fireflies on the night of the full moon of July to be one of their foremost holidays; thus an informed Lórienite can make important conclusions regarding the true situation among Lórien's ruling elite, 'never as united as now,'[86] from the identity of the person in charge and how that person goes about it. The tiniest details carry deep meaning, being a reflection of the nuances of the merciless struggle for power that is the only meaning of life for the immortal Elvish hierarchs. In this set-up a totally innocent detail (such as whether the Lord of Rivendell is represented at the Festival by a cousin or a nephew) can be much more important than, for example, the shocking re-appearance of milord Estebar, the former *clofoel* of Might who had disappeared without a trace some ten years earlier together with the other participants in the Celebrant conspiracy, at the same occasion two years prior. The ex-*clofoel* stood on a *talan* right next to the Lórien's Sovereigns for a couple of hours and then sank into oblivion once again; it was rumored (always with a careful look-around and in a whisper) that he was escorted back to the dungeons under the Mound of Somber Mourning by the *clofoel* of Stars' maiden dancers, rather than the guards of the *clofoel* of Tranquility. Why? Whatever for? This is a great mystery.[87]

This is the right policy: real Power, in order to remain such, has to be both inscrutable and unpredictable—otherwise, it is merely an authority. One could recall here the story (from one of the neighboring Worlds) of the experts who had tried, year after year, to

divine the internal politics of a certain powerful and enigmatic state[88]: they noted the order in which the local hierarchs took their places on the Tomb of the Founder during state holidays, what deviations from the alphabetical order occurred during the enumeration of their names, and the like. The experts were competent and wise, their conclusions deep and unfailingly logical; is it any wonder that they have never once made a correct prediction? Should someone have engaged the aforementioned experts to analyze the situation around the Festival of the Dancing Fireflies in Lórien, year 3019 of the Third Age, they would certainly have produced something like this: “Since this year the responsibility for the Festival has been assigned to the *clofoel* of the World for the first time ever, it follows that the expansionists have decisively triumphed over the isolationists in the Elvish administration; we should expect a rapid growth of Elvish presence in the key regions of Middle Earth. Some analysts believe that the fundamental underlying factor is a shuffling of roles in the court of the Lady, who is concerned with the inordinate strengthening of the *clofoel* of Tranquility.” The funniest thing is that those logical exercises would have been quite correct in and of themselves, as is usual with this brand of analysis . . .

As for the Festival itself, it is uncommonly beautiful. Of course, only an Elf can fully appreciate its beauty; on the other hand, man is really so primitive and puny a creature that even the visible paltry scraps of the Festival’s true splendor are quite enough for him. On this night the inhabitants of Lórien gather on the *telain* close to Nimrodel; the tall *mallorns* provide a magnificent view of the river valley where constellations of bright phial lamps are strewn across the dewy fields surrounding melancholy backwaters (blackened silver, like Gondolin chest ornaments). The night sky itself appears but a dim reflection of this glorious display in an old bronze mirror. Strictly speaking, that is how it really is: on that night the movements of celestial bodies over Middle Earth merely reflect faithfully the happenings on the banks of Nimrodel. As already mentioned, a mortal can perceive only a tiny fraction of what happens there: he can enjoy the starscape, created by the lamps in the grass and unchanged since time immemorial, but human eyes have no business seeing the magical patterns woven by the phials of the dancers—it is this dance that forms the basis for the magic of the Firstborn. Very rarely do the echoes of this magic rhythm reach the world of Men through revelations to its greatest scalds and musicians, forever poisoning their souls with pining for unreachable

perfection.

As befits the *clofoel* of the Festival, Eornis was in the middle of the ‘sky’ this midnight, right where seven phials (six bright ones and one most bright) formed the Sickle of the Valar on the fields of Nimrodel, the constellation whose handle points at the Pole of the World. The *clofoel* of Stars and her dancers—the only ones allowed on the ‘sky’—having left for the shade of the *mallorns* a while ago, she was completely alone, still futilely trying to figure out how baron Grager was going to accomplish what he promised: “By morning light you will find the sack with the Seeing Stone in the grass close to the phial that represents the Polar Star in the Sickle of the Valar.” Access to the ‘sky’ is forbidden to all other Elves, including even other *clofoels*, under pain of death, so there’s no concern with anyone finding the *palantír* before her; but how will the Mordorian spies sneak here? Therefore . . . is it, therefore, one of the dancers? But that’s absolutely impossible—a dancer connected to the Enemy! Oh yeah? What about the *clofoel* of the World connected to the Enemy—is that possible?

She objected to her own thoughts: I’m not connected to the Enemy, I’m merely playing my own game. Sure, I will do everything to save my boy, but I’m not even considering sticking to the conditions of their bargain. In the morning I’ll have the *palantír*, on noon of August first I’ll learn the name of the crown prince of Mordor—who else could it be?—and when it’s time to exchange the hostages I’ll make sure that they all remain in my hands, no worries. Apparently, these Men aren’t familiar with the Elves’ power; well, they’ll learn.

It’s not the Men that I have to fear—what can those dung worms do?—but my own kind. When I win this game I will lay a *palantír* and the head of a Mordorian prince at the feet of the Sovereigns, and no one will dare open their mouth—the winner is always right. Whereas if I fail or they simply won’t let me finish the game, the whole affair will be cast as a pact with the Enemy, as treason. The *clofoel* of Tranquility would give his right hand for a chance to charge me with that and send me to his dungeons under the Mound of Somber Mourning . . . Should he have even a shadow of doubt regarding my talks with the Ithilienians, his Guards will start digging like only they can, and then I’m finished. I did explain my visit to Emyn Arnen to Lady Galadriel by the need to check on news from Umbar: “Someone in Lórien, possibly the *clofoel* of Tranquility, has apparently begun his

own game with Aragorn." Once he finds out about that conversation—which he will—he'll have no choice but to thoroughly besmirch me in the eyes of the Sovereigns, and he'll work hard at it.

She gave a start as it occurred to her: what if this whole business, including the events in Umbar, is nothing but a long-term play by the *clofoel* of Tranquility, and a Guard's hand will be on my shoulder the moment I pick up a sack with a stone imitating a *palantír*? Elandar and those Ithilienian barons working against me for the *clofoel* of Tranquility?! Nonsense . . . I'm being afraid of my own shadow. How come the Ithilienian spies are teaming with Mordorians, obviously with Faramir's knowledge? That's clear, actually: they hope to gain, as their commission in the bargain, an Elvish *clofoel* compromised by working with the Enemy, and therefore forever pliant. Which is exactly how it would've come out had I any intention of playing along.

In any event there's no going back now: the only thing that will save me is victory in this 'prisoner exchange.' Not only will it save me, it will elevate me to the next level! Afterwards I'll find those who will put the sack with the Seeing Stone by the Polar Star tonight; I'll do it myself, with my Service, ahead of the Guards, and expose those traitors to the Council: "Our incomparable preserver of Tranquility had been so busy looking for conspiracies—we all know what that's worth—that he managed to overlook a real Enemy spy network in Caras Galadhon. Or, perhaps, he did not overlook it at all? Perhaps this network is connected higher than I dare suggest?" He won't survive such a blow, no matter how Lord Celeborn covers for him; it will be a clear victory for the Lady and me.

In the meantime, Kumai's *Dragon* glided invisibly through Lórien's night sky along the dimly reflecting meanders of Nimrodel. Once he saw a large spread of bright bluish lights forming a pretty good star map in the middle of a valley, the engineer relaxed and guided the glider down; so far everything was going according to plan. He located the Dipper, for some reason called the Sickle of the Valar in those parts, among these 'constellations'—good, just where it belongs in the real sky, with the Polar Star in the right place. Wonder what those lamps are made from? The light is obviously cold—perhaps the same stuff that luminesces in rotting mushrooms? The Dipper was growing fast; Kumai felt on the bottom of the cockpit for the sack he had extracted last night from its hiding place in the back of the Great Hall fireplace, and suddenly cursed through clenched teeth: "Damn, he

never told me the actual size of that thing—how am I to figure my altitude in this dark?"

Haladdin had originally asked him to just retrieve the sack from the hiding place and drop it somewhere far away from the fortress during the next training flight, so he could pick it up and get away. Then the doctor cut himself off in mid-sentence and asked, amazed: "Listen, maybe you can fly all the way to Lórien from here?"

"Sure, no sweat. Well, not exactly no sweat, but I can."

"What about at night?"

"Well, I haven't flown such distances at night before—it's hard to navigate."

"What if it's a moonlit night and the target site has guiding lights?"

"Then it will be easier. Do you need aerial reconnaissance?"

"No. You see, I remembered how good you've gotten at dropping shells on ground targets. That's exactly the trick you'll need to pull off in Lórien."

Kumai had justified a night flight to his Dol Guldur superiors with a suggestion to practice nighttime bombing. "Whatever the hell for?" "To drop incendiary shells onto enemy camps. If you have to put out burning tents on the night before a battle rather than get some sleep, you won't be in good shape to fight in the morning." "Hmm . . . sounds reasonable. Very well, try it, engineer." He took off at sunset ("I'll fly around a bit until it gets dark"), made a wide turn so as not to be seen from the fortress, and only then headed west-north-west. He found the place where Nimrodel emptied into Anduin while it was still light, the rest was fairly routine . . .

Kumai let go and the sack disappeared into the 'star'-studded darkness below. Two seconds later the glider's nose covered the Polar Star: all set. If he wasn't off by much figuring his altitude, the target has been hit. ("Is it some sort of poison?" "No, magic." "Magic?! You got nothing better to do?" "Trust me: the Lórien bunch won't like this sack at all." "Well, well. When things are really bad, people always swap magicians for physicians . . .") Whatever—he did his part, it's the commanders' job to know what all this is for. The less you know the better you sleep. Time to turn around and go home; it's a long way, plus the wind is getting stronger.

When Kumai took a habitually sweeping turn over the sleepy waters of Nimrodel, he failed to take one thing into account: the height of the *mallorns*. Or, rather, he had no idea that such tall trees even existed.

There was a crash when one of their branches touched a wingtip, seemingly lightly, instantly turning the glider into a spinning winged seed like those that the *mallorns* drop by the hundreds onto the wilted *elanors* in the fall.

There was another crash when the helpless *Dragon* spun right and slammed into the neighboring treetop, tearing its skin, breaking its spine and bones.

Finally, there was a third crash when all that debris fell down along the trunk and onto a *talan* full of stunned Elves, almost right at the feet of the *clofoel* of Tranquility.

Strictly speaking, Kumai had done his job by then and could have been written off as an acceptable loss, with an appropriate mention of the omelet whose preparation requires breaking a few eggs. There was, however, one complicating circumstance: the Troll got quite banged up in the fall, but survived it—which was, understandably, a complete disaster.

CHAPTER 61

Star Council of Lórien

July 23, 3019 of the Third Age

C*lofoel* of Tranquility: Haste is advisable when hunting fleas or dealing with a sudden bout of diarrhea, esteemed *clofoel* of Might. So please don't urge me along: Trolls are tough guys and I'll need a significant amount of time to get reliable information out of him.

Lady Galadriel: How much time do you need, *clofoel* of Tranquility?

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: I believe no less than three days, o radiant Lady.

***Clofoel* of Might**: He just wants to give his bums under the Mound of Somber Mourning something to do, o radiant Sovereigns! This is so simple—let him use his truth potion and that spawn of Morgoth will spill his guts in a quarter-hour!

Lord Cereborn: Indeed, *clofoel* of Tranquility, why don't you use the truth potion?

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: Is that an order, o radiant Lord?

Lord Cereborn: No, no, please don't . . .

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: Thank you, o radiant Lord! It's a strange thing: were I to start teaching the *clofoel* of Might how to arrange bowmen or cavalry for battle, he would have taken it as an insult, and he would have been right. Whereas when it comes to detecting criminals, somehow everyone here knows my job better than I do!

Lord Cereborn: No, please don't take it this way . . .

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: As for the truth potion, esteemed *clofoel* of Might, it has no problem cracking open a Man's mind—as you've correctly noted, it'd take less than a quarter-hour.

The problem is sorting all the garbage that will spill from that cracked mind: trust me, it will take more than a few weeks to sift the kernels from the chaff. The potion is great for obtaining confessions, but what we need here is information! And what if something will be unclear at the first pass and explanations will be necessary? We won't be able to ask a second time, since he'll have turned into a drooling cretin. Therefore, please allow me to use more traditional methods.

Lady Galadriel: That was an excellent explanation, *clofoel* of Tranquility, thank you. I can see that the investigation is in good hands, please proceed as you see fit. But I've just thought of something. Since the mechanical dragon flew here from outside, this investigation may uncover really interesting nuances that have more to do with Middle Earth than with the Enchanted Forests. Dear Lord Cereborn, do you think that it may be beneficial to involve the *clofoel* of the World in the investigation, since she's better acquainted with those specifics?

Lord Cereborn: Yes, yes, that's very reasonable! Isn't it, *clofoel* of Tranquility?

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: I dare not discuss the directives of the radiant Lady, o radiant Lord.

But perhaps it will be easier to remove me from this task altogether, since I am not trusted?

Lord Cereborn: No, don't even think about it! I'd be lost without you!

Lady Galadriel: We ought to consider the good of Lórien ahead of personal ambitions, *clofoel* of Tranquility. This is an extraordinary incident; two experts are always better than one. Do you disagree?

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: How can I, o radiant Lady!

***Clofoel* of the World**: I have always dreamed of working with you, esteemed *clofoel* of Tranquility. My stores of knowledge and skills are entirely at your disposal, and I hope that they will prove useful.

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: I have no doubt they will, esteemed *clofoel* of the World.

Lady Galadriel: This is settled, then; keep us informed, *clofoel* of Tranquility. What did the *clofoel* of Stars wish to tell the Council?

***Clofoel* of Stars**: I have no desire to needlessly disturb you, o radiant Sovereigns and esteemed *clofoels* of the Council, but it appears that this morning the pattern of the stars in the sky has changed slightly. This indicates a change of the entire arrangement of magic in the Enchanted Forests; some new, quite strong magical power has

appeared here. The only time something similar had happened in my memory was when the Lady's Mirror was delivered to Caras Galadhon.

Lady Galadriel: Could your dancers be mistaken, *clofoel* of Stars?

***Clofoel* of Stars**: I would like to believe that, o radiant Lady. We will dance again tonight . . .

Kumai came to sooner than the Elves expected. Lifting his head painfully, he saw brilliant white walls with no windows; the sickly bluish light of the phial over a bar door seemed to drip off them onto the floor. He had no clothes on and his right hand was chained to the narrow bed, which was attached to the floor; when he touched his head he jerked his hand back in surprise: it was clean-shaven, with a long recent scar on its top smeared in something stinky and oily to the touch. He leaned back slowly, closed his eyes, and swallowed convulsively: understanding everything, he was scared as never before in his life. He would have given anything for a chance to die right then, before they got started, but—alas!—he had nothing left to give.

"Get up, Troll! No rest for the spawn of Morgoth! You have a long road to hell before you, so let's get underway."

There were three Elves—a man and a woman in identical silver-black cloaks and a deferential muscleman in a leather jacket. They appeared in the cell without a sound, moving with unnatural lightness, like huge moths, but somehow it was clear that they had strength to match a Troll's. The Elf-woman looked the prisoner over unceremoniously and whispered something—apparently obscene—to her companion; the man grimaced chidingly.

"Maybe you'd like to tell us something yourself, Troll?"

"Maybe I would." Kumai sat up, carefully lowering his legs off the bed, and was now waiting for nausea to subside. He had made a decision and fear receded, having no room left. "What do I get in return?"

"In return?!" The impudence struck the Elf speechless for a couple of seconds. "An easy death. Is that not enough?"

"No, it's not. Easy death is already there for me; I've had a weak heart since childhood, so torturing me is useless; it'll end when it begins."

The Elf gave a silvery laugh. "You lie beautifully and engagingly."

Kumai shrugged. "Give it a try. The higher-ups will give you hell if a spy dies under questioning, no?"

“We are the higher-ups, Troll.” The Elf sat down on a chair just brought into the cell by the man in leather jacket. “But please continue lying, we’re listening with interest.”

What’s there to lie about? He’s no child and understands his position. But he’s no dumb fanatic and has no wish to die for Motherland, his oath, or other such phantoms. Whatever for? The bosses keep sending them to certain death while sitting it out in the rear, cowardly dogs that they are . . . He’ll tell all he knows, and he knows quite a lot, having been on a lot of special missions for a long time—but not for free. Do you promise to keep him alive?

It’s such a small thing for you. In an underground prison forever, in a lead mine, blinded and castrated, but alive?

“Say your piece, then, Troll. If you tell the truth and we find it interesting, we’ll find you a job in our mines. What do you think, milady Eornis?”

“Sure! Why not let him keep his life?”

Very well, his name is Cloud (shouldn’t get tripped up, he did have such a nickname as a child—that brat Sonya came up with it and it stuck to him until the University), Engineer Second Class, his last military unit was a guerilla band led by . . . Indun (that was an old professor who taught them optics during sophomore year). The band is based in Tzagan-Tzab Gorge in the Ash Mountains (that’s where Dad’s mine is, the place is nature-made for guerilla warfare, there has to be Resistance there . . . anyway, can’t come up with anything else that’d be consistent on the spot). Yesterday . . . wait, what day is it today? Ah yes, of course, you ask the questions here, sorry . . . Anyway, on the morning of the twenty-second he received orders to fly to Lórien so as to reach it on that night and spy out the positioning of the lights in the valley of Nimrodel. Personally he thinks that the whole affair is bogus, driven by desperation among the commanders who seem to be monkeying with some kind of magic. No, this time the order was not given by Indun, but by some other guy, never seen him before, apparently from Army Intelligence, nicknamed Jackal . . . What he looks like?

An Orocuen, short, slanty-eyed, a small scar over the left brow . . . yes, he’s certain, the left one . . .

“This is very naïve, Troll. I’m not calling you Cloud, because that name is as false as everything else you’ve told us. There are two golden rules for responding to an interrogation: avoid direct lies and too many details. You broke both. Tell me, driver of the mechanical

dragon, what was the strength and direction of the wind on that day?"

That's it, then—who would've thought that the Elf knew anything about flying? In any event, while spinning all that nonsense Kumai was readying a certain surprise for his interrogators. The dejected pose he had assumed allowed him to gather his legs under him, and now, seeing that the game was up, he lunged forward like an uncoiling spring, trying to reach the Elf in the silver-black cloak with his free left hand. He would have probably succeeded if not for another mistake: he met the Elf's eye in the process.

The *clofoel* of Tranquility stopped the leather-jacket guy from dashing at the suddenly frozen Troll with an annoyed flick of the wrist —why bother now?—and turned to his companion with a mocking smile: "So how about spending some time alone with this specimen, milady Eornis? Changed your mind?"

"On the contrary—he's magnificent, a real beast!"

"You sport! Very well, since you like his manhood so much, you can keep him. But not until we work him a little, lest he die in your embrace—it could happen, you know—and take everything he knows with him . . . You'd be really upset with such an outcome, wouldn't you?"

CHAPTER 62

"Wake up!" The leather-jacket standing behind Kumai's chair kicked him habitually in the Achilles' tendon, the pain immediately jerking the Troll out of a second-long blissful unconsciousness.

"Where did you fly from? What was your mission?" That was the man at the table. They worked together: one asking questions (the same ones over and over, hour after hour), the other kicking the prisoner's heel from behind whenever he tried either to stand up or to put down his head, leaden with insomnia. The kicks were not even that strong, but always in the same spot, so after a dozen hits the pain turned unbearable, making all his thoughts about the next inevitable kick . . . Kumai had no illusions: this was not even a warm-up. They simply had not started on him in earnest yet, only depriving him of water and sleep so far.

The engineer forbade himself to consider what might follow once they saw that he was not going to cooperate. He simply decided to hold out for as long as possible to buy some time for Grizzly and Wolverine—maybe those smart guys would figure out the danger and save the Weapon Monastery. He had absent-mindedly left a map with the flight route to the Nimrodel on top of his work table, and his only hope now was that someone would find it and connect it to his disappearance. But how are they to guess that I'm alive and in the Elves' hands, rather than dead? What can they do even if they guess—evacuate Dol Guldur? Don't know; revelations and miracles are the One's job, mine is to hold out and hope . . .

"Wake up!" This time the guy behind him overdid his blow, knocking Kumai out. When the engineer came to, the leather-jacket at the table had been replaced by the Elf in the silver-black cloak.

"Have you ever been told that you're an incredibly lucky man, Troll?"

He had lost track of time some unbelievably long time ago; the harsh light bounced off the walls and ate at his watering eyes, and a

handful of hot sand had accumulated under each eyelid. He squeezed his eyes shut and once again slid into the abyss of sleep . . . This time he was brought back almost politely, with a shake of the shoulder instead of the usual kick—something must've changed in their setup . . .

"Anyway, to continue: I don't know who advised you to fly your mission in uniform, but our lawyers—may they burn in the Eternal Fire!—have suddenly decided that this makes you a prisoner of war, rather than a spy. According to your Middle Earth laws a prisoner of war is protected by the Convention: he can't be forced to break his oath and all that . . ." The Elf dug through papers on his desk, found the needed spot and put his finger on it with visible disapproval. "As I understand it, they want to trade you for someone, so sign here and go get some sleep."

Kumai opened his parched lips: "I'm illiterate."

"An illiterate driver of a mechanical dragon? Not bad . . . Print your finger, then."

"Like hell."

"Whatever, man: I'll just note that you refused to sign and be done with it. Nobody but your commanders needs these papers anyway, if indeed it does get to an exchange. That's it, you can go . . . I mean: take the detainee away! Actually, my apologies, *sir*—you're a prisoner of war now, rather than a detainee . . ."

When the leather-jackets led the engineer into the corridor, the *clofoel* of Tranquility bit out in his back: "You're real lucky, Troll. In a couple of hours I was going to deal with you personally . . . Why did you fly to Lórien, eh?"

He only believed in his victory when he saw *lembas* on a small table in his cell, and—most importantly—a pitcher of ice-cold water, its clay sides covered with a silvery web that turned into large drops under his fingers. The water had a slightly sweet tang to it, but he did not notice it—a man who had gone without water for several days is simply incapable of doing so.

Sleep came, sweet and light, as it always is after a victory. He smelled home—old wood, couch leather, Dad's pipe and something else without a name; Mama was quietly puttering in the kitchen, cooking his favorite black beans and surreptitiously wiping away tears; Sonya and Halik—their carefree pre-war selves—were eagerly asking him about his adventures; well, guys, that was really something, you'd never believe . . .

Smiling happily, he talked in his sleep.

He did not just talk—he answered direct questions posed by someone's comforting even voice.

. . . His superiors at Dol Guldur decided that he was dead: "Apparently he has miscalculated his altitude during the most recent flight, which was at night, and hit a tree. Attempts to locate the body and the remains of the glider near the castle have not proved fruitful yet."

The next day, following his instructions, Grizzly sealed the engineer's papers, including the flight maps, and sent it all to Féanor headquarters in Minas Tirith without reading.

Lórien, Star Council

July 25, 3019 of the Third Age

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: As you can see, it is quite possible to do without torture and the brain-busting truth potion.

Lady Galadriel: You're a real master of your craft, *clofoel* of Tranquility. What did you find out?

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: The dragon driver's name is Kumai, he is an Engineer Second Class. As we suspected, he flew here from Dol Guldur. Judging by his tales, it had been turned into a real snake nest where escaped Mordorian scientists are creating unheard-of weapons under tutelage of their intelligence service. His real mission here was from the Order of the Nazgúl—to drop a sack with some magical item, whose nature is unknown to him, onto the 'sky' next to Nimrodel. I believe it is the presence of that item that the esteemed *clofoel* of Stars and her dancers have felt. My Guards have conducted a thorough search of the valley of the Nimrodel, but found nothing: someone had removed the sack.

Therefore, o radiant Sovereigns—please understand me correctly—therefore, I insist that the esteemed *clofoel* of the World be removed from this investigation.

Lady Galadriel: Let us call a spade a spade, *clofoel* of Tranquility. Do you believe that the *clofoel* of the World had somehow treated with the Enemy and that the item dropped from the sky was intended for

her?

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: I did not say that, o radiant Lady. However, only the dancers and the *clofoel* of the Festival had access to the 'sky.' Had the Troll's gift been there during the Dance of the Fireflies, they certainly would have sensed it, whereas the *clofoel* of the World was the only one there after they left . . .

Lady Galadriel: Could the Elves that gather up the phials at sunrise have found that Mordorian sack and taken it with them, out of ignorance?

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: They could have, o radiant Lady, and my Guards are working on that possibility. Which is why I am only asking that the *clofoel* of the World be temporarily removed from the investigation of 'the case of the Mordorian sack' until this is ascertained, nothing more.

Lord Cereborn: Yes, this does seem a reasonable precaution, isn't it?

Lady Galadriel: You're right as always, Lord Cereborn. However, as long as we allow the possibility of treason by a *clofoel*, why don't we suppose that conspiring dancers have indeed found the Mordorian sack that night and took it away for their own purposes? That would explain why they still haven't found the source of such a powerful magical disturbance . . .

***Clofoel* of Stars**: How am I to understand your words, o radiant Lady? Are you accusing me of conspiring?

Lord Cereborn: Yes, Lady, I have to admit that you have lost me, too . . . A conspiracy of dancers—is such a horror even possible?! With all that they're capable of . . .

Lady Galadriel: There is no conspiracy of dancers, Lord Cereborn, please calm down! I was speaking hypothetically, as an example. As long as we're suspecting everybody, let it be everybody, with no exceptions; but I believe it's time for us to listen to the *clofoel* of the World.

***Clofoel* of the World**: Thank you, o radiant Lady. First of all, I would like to defend the *clofoel* of Stars, strange as it may seem. She is being blamed for being unable to find a powerful magical source. However, I would like to suggest that this task may be akin to looking for last year's snow.

Lady Galadriel: Could you be more clear, *clofoel* of the World?

***Clofoel* of the World**: I obey, o radiant Lady! For some reason the esteemed *clofoel* of Tranquility keeps talking about a magical object

dropped on the ‘sky’ and surreptitiously removed from there as if it was a firmly established fact . . .

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: It is a firmly established fact, esteemed *clofoel* of the World. You and I were not the only ones present at the Troll’s interrogation—at least three independent witnesses can corroborate his testimony.

***Clofoel* of the World**: Esteemed *clofoel* of Tranquility, your memory is playing tricks on you, as does your predilection to see conspiracies everywhere. The Troll testified that he had dropped a sack the contents of which he knew nothing about. Why are you looking for a physical object? Could it not have been swamp fire or some other intangible magical filth that simply melted in the sun and poisoned the countryside? Actually, I dare not discuss magical techniques in the presence of the esteemed *clofoel* of Stars.

***Clofoel* of Stars**: I find your suggestion quite likely, esteemed *clofoel* of the World. More likely than a conspiracy of the dancers, at any rate.

Lady Galadriel: Did you want to tell us anything else in connection with the investigation, *clofoel* of the World?

***Clofoel* of the World**: Most assuredly, o radiant Sovereigns! The esteemed *clofoel* of Tranquility is convinced that Dol Guldur, whence the dragon came, is run by Mordor, but I have reached a different conclusion. Certainly the notion that the Troll was working on orders from the Nazgúl is nonsense—we know better than anyone that the Black Order is no more. This Kumai’s history, however, is very interesting. He was captured at the Field of Pelennor and was rotting away at the Mindolluin quarry, as usual, when he was rescued precisely because he was a builder of mechanical dragons. The Troll is still convinced that it was his country’s intelligence service that got him out, but it looks like the poor man has been swindled. Queen Arwen’s entourage has reasons to believe that all those escapes from Mindolluin had been engineered by none other than His Majesty Elessar Elfstone, who desires Mordorian military technology. According to Arwen’s data, he had set up a special super-secret service for this purpose, the core of which are the dead he had revived with the Shadow spell; the little that is known about these characters includes the fact that they are all named after predators. Esteemed *clofoel* of Tranquility, why do you think the Troll gave the nickname Jackal to the supposed Mordorian intelligence agent when spinning his clumsy legend? Simply because all such agents he had dealt with

at Dol Guldur had such names! I have no doubt that Aragorn's service controls Dol Guldur and had dispatched the dragon here. This prompts the following question to the esteemed *clofoel* of Tranquility: what did he talk about with Aragorn in private for over two hours, back during the latter's January visit to Caras Galadhon?

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: Excuse me, but I had talked to him by order of the radiant Sovereigns!

Lady Galadriel: Lord Cereborn, do you see the kind of interesting picture you get when your information comes from not one, but two independent and not too friendly sources?

Lord Cereborn: Yes, yes, you're right, but I'm a little confused . . . This idea that the *clofoel* of Tranquility is connected to those . . . those living dead—it's just a joke, right?

Lady Galadriel: I do wish that it turn out to be a joke. Our first priority, then, is to destroy Dol Guldur immediately, before they get ready . . .

***Clofoel* of Might**: O radiant Lady, I will burn out that snake nest!

Lady Galadriel: I seem to remember that you and Lord Cereborn have already burned it out not three months ago . . . No, I have other, more important plans for you. I will deal with Dol Guldur myself this time: we have to knock down its walls once and for all—then it may work. Besides, I would really like to capture one of those beasties of Aragorn's alive. How many people man that fake fortress, *clofoel* of Tranquility?

***Clofoel* of Tranquility**: A few dozen, o radiant Lady, I can check . . .

Lady Galadriel: There's no need. Turn a thousand warriors over to my command, *clofoel* of Might, I'm leaving immediately. As for all of you . . . *Clofoels* of Tranquility and the World are to continue their joint investigation; I find that their cooperative work is producing excellent results, keep it up. The dancers and the *clofoel* of Stars are to continue looking for the magical object that had been dropped on Caras Galadhon, but only together with the Guards, lest the finder decide to study its magical properties alone. As for you, *clofoel* of Might, you will remain in charge here and watch over all of them: those are really children who may set the house on fire while Mama is away. For example, *clofoel* of Tranquility shouldn't play soldier with his beloved Border Guard, the *clofoel* of Stars shouldn't preen before my Mirror, the *clofoel* of the World . . . do you understand me, *clofoel* of Might?

***Clofoel* of Might**: How could I not, o radiant Lady?! I know these scheming troublemakers like the back of my hand!

Lord Cereborn: What about me, Lady?

Lady Galadriel: You, Lord Cereborn, are to represent Lórien's supreme power, as usual: show yourself to people, sign royal proclamations, and all that . . .

CHAPTER 63

Mirkwood, south of Dol Guldur

July 31, 3019

The rain seemed endless. Fall-like cold drizzle hung in the air for three straight days; when thunder rolled, it seemed like the gods leisurely kicking water out of an enormous mattress hanging almost all the way down to earth. Over the last three days the little creek that Grizzly's company had just run up against had turned into a raging river tossing small stones in its path. While six men were rigging a suspended rope bridge to ferry over the seriously wounded, the rest of the soldiers stood motionlessly on the bank. Icy rivulets ran down their tired faces, turning sweaty clothing into ice packs and steadily eroding whatever fighting spirit they had left. Running, standing still, and icy chills—a winning combination.

Grizzly looked at the taut rope suspending the first of the helpless wounded on chest and waist harnesses, then at the ford where crossing horsemen fought the current, kicking up coffee-colored water, and once again clenched his teeth. Rotten luck—he had not expected to spend nearly an hour crossing this creek, what with Elves already breathing down their necks. Most of his men were still desperately fighting at Dol Guldur, their only task to preoccupy the main forces of the Elvish army that had invaded Mirkwood the day before yesterday. Grizzly himself, having miraculously slipped through the tightening noose of the besiegers with a column of Mordorian and Isengardian engineers in his keep, was now going south along the highway with all possible haste, concurrently diverting the Elvish pursuit from Wolverine, who was escaping alone with papers in his backpack—what of the Weapon Monastery archives they had not yet sent down.

Grizzly's entire plan hinged on the Elves' sending only a small contingent to chase them, one they would be able to repulse once joined to Aragorn's forces guarding the Brown Lands portion of the highway against the real Mordorians. Everything was going all right until they ran into this damned creek . . . time, they were running out of time! Grizzly stood hidden by the mossy trunk of a Mirkwood fir, expecting to see silent shadows in gray-green camouflage cloaks flit through the trees at any second. Actually, he was not likely to see anything—his last experience would be a short whistle of an Elvish arrow.

"Lieutenant, sir!" One of his subordinates showed up by his side. "The escorted persons and personnel are all across. Your turn."

That was fast, Grizzly congratulated himself; then he froze, looking at the raging river and treacherous water-slick boulders on its banks with a new, appreciative look. Well, Firstborn, just you wait—betcha we'll get all the lost time back with interest.

"Sergeant!"

"Yes, sir?"

"How many steel crossbows do we have?.."

. . . Lord Ereborn and his troop reached the creek about half an hour after Grizzly's company disappeared in the rain on its other side. For about ten minutes the Elvish lookouts spread around behind the trees and studied the opposite bank, seeing nothing. Then a volunteer, one Edoret, his sword tied up on his back, carefully entered the stream and picked his way forward between eddies and rapids, expecting a shot at any second. When the water reached the middle of his thighs, he got swept off his feet, but the Elf could swim like an otter; having luckily escaped the gauntlet of boulders, he soon reached a small backwater under the opposite bank, where large heads of yellowish foam piled up between the branches of semi-submerged willows strung with grassy debris. Edoret got out of the water, waved to his friends and halted, figuring the best way to get through the boulders without breaking his neck; the lookouts caught their breath and put their bows down—it looked safe. The field manual of any army in any world demands that the scout be given time to ascertain the situation, but Ereborn was in a hurry to catch his prey before dark and decided to save on the precautions. Five Elves followed Edoret at his sign.

When they were about knee-deep in the water, the loud call of a blue jay sounded over the creek, and at that signal a crossbow volley hit from the other side. Three Elves were either killed immediately or

grievously wounded, drowned, and carried away by the stream; the fourth had his shoulder shattered but managed to get out of the water and limp back into the trees; the fifth fared worst of all—the bolt hit him through the gut and stuck in the spine, leaving him sprawled at the water's edge. Time seemed to stop for Edoret, trapped on the enemy side: the scout had a brief moment to spy out the crossbowmen hidden higher on the slope, even managing to count them (six), and soberly figured out the time it would take him to unlimber his bound-up sword and close in on the enemy, slipping on the slick boulders all along the way. He then made the only appropriate decision: dived back into the river and let the stream carry him away. The bolt that sped after him only dinged the top of a water-polished boulder, leaving a whitish scar smelling of singed chicken and immediately obliterated by the rain.

Lord Ereborn was what is known as 'a young man from a good family;' he had neither a commander's gift nor at least a warrior's blood-tempered experience, but he did have an abundance of vainglorious courage—a dangerous combination. Seeing that they were dealing with a small group of bowmen covering the retreat of the main force, rather than the rear guard of that force, the lieutenant decided to bet the farm on the crossbows' major weakness—long reloading time (two shots per minute compared to two dozen for a bow)—and ordered a frontal attack. The *Dragon's Claw* (his family sword) raised high; Ereborn blew two trumpet blasts and waded into the stream amidst tremendous splashing. The lieutenant had on a suit of armor of famed Gondolin sponge steel[89], almost as strong as *mithril*, so he did not fear the arrows from the other bank.

A moment later he fully appreciated the difference between Angmarian hunting arbalests he was familiar with and the next-generation steel crossbows developing twelve hundred force-pounds at the bowstring. The three-ounce armor-piercing bolt hit Ereborn in the lower right chest at eighty yards per second; the links of the Gondolin armor acquitted themselves admirably, preventing the arrow from digging into the Elf's insides, but a half-ton blow to the liver will knock out anyone. The bloodless face in a silvery helmet flashed once amidst the rapids, the billowing fabric of the cloak was pulled under after it and disappeared forever—the ancient armor turned into deadweight. The young armor-bearer who dashed to the rescue got a bolt straight into the bridge of his nose, and the attack fizzled out.

Any Men, be they the savage Haradrim, the Riders of Rohan, or

even Umbarian marines, simply would have used their overwhelming numbers to charge across the cursed ford, bridging it with their corpses and overwhelming the few defenders in a minute or two. Not so the Elves—the price of a Firstborn's life is way too high to lay them down like that on the banks of some nameless Mirkwood creek. They have really come here to hunt (albeit a very dangerous prey) rather than wage war; such attitude is not conducive to either scaling a castle wall or running across a ford under fire. Retrieving their dead and wounded, the Elves retreated under the cover of trees and showered the enemy with arrows. Pretty soon it turned out that the archery duel was not going right, either (meaning to the Firstborn). The rain was the culprit: the Elvish bowstrings were hopelessly wet and the arrows fell harmlessly, plus it was nearly impossible to take decent aim. In the meantime, Dol Guldur bolts kept finding their mark—truly a device of Morgoth!

The Elves had to retreat further into the forest, leaving only well-hidden lookouts by the riverbank. Sir Taranquil, Ereborn's second, counted the bodies laid out in a row, black butterflies already appearing over them out of nowhere (even the rain was no obstacle!), added the four washed away by the stream, gritted his teeth and swore to himself by the thrones of the Valar that those crossbowmen, be they Orcs or whoever, would pay dearly, and to hell with the Lady's order to capture some alive. The scouts he sent out came back soon thereafter with bad news—no better than the events of the past hour. Both sides of the path were blocked by fallen trees—the domain of the giant ants—as far as the eye could see; those thickets came straight up to the water both up and down the stream, so Taranquil's idea to send some forces up and down the bank to force the enemy to spread out was a no-go. "If we were to go back and around the thickets—how far back do they stretch?" "No idea, sir! Shall I check?" "No!" There was no time for such exploits—much has been lost already and night was coming. There was no way forward but a frontal attack.

A frontal attack does not have to be a headlong rush, though. Sir Taranquil was a much more experienced commander than his predecessor and had no desire to cross the creek playing a target. His fighters crept up to the trees by the ford, and the sniper duel resumed.

This time, though, the Elves have had time to swap in spare bowstrings, plus the rain let up a little, so their arrows sped true now; finally the Elves (without a doubt the best archers in Middle Earth)

could show what they could do. The Mordorian crossbowmen fired prone from behind boulders for cover, so their corpses were not visible from this side, but Taranquil could warrant that they were down from six to two at most. Only after exploiting his advantage in fire density to the fullest did he order another attack. The other bank responded with a drawn-out and imprecise volley—but from six crossbows once again! Are these Morgoth's tricks? Did they get reinforcements?

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Suddenly all crossbow fire ceased and a scrap of cloth tied to a scabbard waved over the boulders. The Elvish archers had already put five arrows through it by the time Taranquil snapped out of it and ordered: “Cease fire!! For now,” he added, quieter. “Are they surrendering? Well, well . . .” The scrap waved for a short while longer and then the amazed Elves beheld scout Edoret, alive and well, sword in hand. “Come over, now!”

“. . . Where’s the rest of them?” Taranquil inquired after checking out the natural fort. There were six crossbows in the gaps between the boulders but only two corpses (dressed in Mordorian uniform without insignia, but neither one an Orc by appearance; one with an arrow in his eye, the other with half his head taken off by Edoret’s sword).

“I don’t know, sir,” the scout replied, abandoning the flask proffered by one of his comrades and grudgingly ending his saga of how he, no doubt protected by Ulmo and Oromë themselves, managed to crawl to the enemy shore some three hundred yards downstream, crept through the forest and attacked the enemy from the rear. “There were six of them at first, but by the time I got to this nest there was only one bird in it,” Edoret nodded at the half-headed corpse, “he was firing all the crossbows in turn. I think that the others have retreated, sir—they were almost out of arrows. Shall we pursue?”

. . . When the rider from the ford caught up with Grizzly’s team (this was the unheard-of reward for the first man to be wounded—to immediately carry the news), they were having a quick rest stop in a large heather field, which abound here at the edge of the Mirkwood in the Brown Lands. The lieutenant listened to the dispatch silently and his face thawed a little for the first time in three days—so far everything was going as he expected. So the Elves did send only about a hundred hunters after them, the rest being stuck fast at Dol Guldur . . . less however many the crossbowmen will get at that mad creek—you really can’t know where you’ll gain and where you’ll lose. The

most important thing is that if my boys manage to hold out for at least a couple of hours (which they will, there's no doubt of that now), then we'll join His Majesty's forces tonight: they had to have received messages already and even now must be on a forced march to our rescue. Watch out, Firstborn! Did we really make it?

I wonder where we should set up the new Weapon Monastery—perhaps indeed in Mordor?

Wait, what am I saying—after the Gondorian army gets involved, even the densest of these smart guys will wise up. On the other hand, maybe that's for the best—where're they to go now? Guys, you've been serving the enemy for quite a while now—want us to turn you over to the Resistance with appropriate explanations? No? Sure they'll keep working on the Weapon of Vengeance for us. Well, that's all in the future; right now my job is to deliver all escorted persons safe and sound and let the commanders sort it all out. Really, who would've thought that all those Jageddins and such would become the greatest treasure of the Crown? Well, we won't be unemployed, either—these guys take a lot of looking after.

Imagine, they did figure out how to turn those stupid 'flying drops' into real weapons. That the drops' accuracy would improve dramatically if they were made to spin in flight like an arrow was fairly obvious, but how do you make the damn jar spin along its axis? They have tried attaching spiral wings to it after the manner of arrow fletching—total failure. Then someone recalled the 'ring of fire'—a kind of fireworks they had in Barad-Dur—a light ring on an axis spun by *powder*-filled cylinders attached to it tangentially. So they married this toy to the 'drop' by drilling several channels sideways through the sides of the jar's mouth where the flame exits, and the flying jar spun like a charm.

It is the description of this particular invention that Wolverine is now carrying in his backpack on his escape through Mirkwood. Well, he's an old hand at this, the forest is home to him, he should make it. Once he finds the boat with a stock of food hidden in the reeds, he can make his getaway good. It's a long way to Minas Tirith and he will only be able to sail at night, but it'd make no sense to hurry at this point. So even if their group doesn't make it, His Majesty will acquire a fabulous new weapon!

A lookout interrupted his musings: "Lieutenant, sir! There's a rider up ahead, going at full speed!"

When the lieutenant recognized the man who had dismounted near

the head of the group, he did not believe his eyes at first and then broke into a decidedly non-regulation grin: the Old Man brought help all by himself, rather than trusting somebody else—a real father to the troops!

"Hail, Captain!"

"At ease, Lieutenant," Cheetah saluted curtly. His grey cloak (maybe one of those they wore at the Field of Pelennor?) and the exhausted horse were all splattered with road mud.

"Make a defensive perimeter—the Elves will be here in a quarter of an hour."

"How many?"

"About two hundred. They've crossed over into the northern Brown Lands the day before yesterday, took the highway and are now coming to meet you."

"I see," Grizzly mumbled, remembering with a sudden clarity his moment of relaxation ten minutes ago: did we really make it? Should've knocked on wood—my dumb head, for example.

"Captain, you see how many men I have . . . we can't hold out until the main force arrives."

"What main force, Lieutenant? There is no main force."

"But you . . ." was all Grizzly could say.

"I'm here, as you can see." The captain shrugged, the gesture momentarily making him look absolutely civilian.

"So we were simply sold out?"

"Now, now, Lieutenant—sold out?" Cheetah drawled mockingly. "Not 'sold out,' but 'sacrificed in the name of the Highest State Interests.' You know, the way you did with the defenders of Dol Guldur—sacrifice the few for the many, right? Long story short—Minas Tirith has decided that now is not the time to meet the Elves 'edge against edge,' so all our forces and their support structures have pulled back from the highway. Dol Guldur? What Dol Guldur? No idea what you're talking about."

"As I understand it, Captain, you didn't like that decision at all, sir?"

"I'm here, as you can see," the chief of Task Force Féanor repeated deliberately. "Our Service doesn't allow the luxury of a resignation . . ."

"Elves!!" came a cry from up ahead, full of not even fear, but a hopeless despondency.

"No panic!" roared Cheetah; leaping into the saddle, he stood in the

stirrups and, raising a narrow Elvish sword (yes, the very one from the Field of Pelennor!) to the solidly overcast sky, ordered: “Square formation, Lieutenant! Horsemen to the right!”

Perhaps he added something else, appropriately historic, like the “Donkeys and scientists to the middle!”[90] that was sounded over the dunes of a neighboring World under similar circumstances. But be that as it may, those words did not make it into the history textbooks of Middle Earth: the approaching Elvish line was too far to hear, and none of those now taking up defense next to Cheetah were destined to see the dawn of August the first. So it goes.

CHAPTER 65

Lórien, Caras Galadhon

August 1, 3019

They have gathered in the Blue Hall of the Galadhon Palace at the crack of dawn at the insistence of the *clofoel* of Stars. The morning felt like fall: crisp and cold like water in a forest spring, so the chills that afflicted Eornis (invisibly to anyone else) may have been due to that; at least that was what she wanted to believe. What is the Mistress of the Stars up to? Great Eru, what if her dancers had found the *palantír*? No, that's impossible, but what if they've figured out where it is? In the meantime, the main problem—how to get to the Mirror, closely guarded by *clofoel* of Might's men, today at noon—remains unsolved, and I am still bereft of ideas.

It has been clear to everyone for the past week that they had to look for a physical object after all (the possibility of swamp fire or another magical emanation, suggested by the *clofoel* of the World, has been duly checked and found untrue), and a methodical search began. When it is said that the dancers of the *clofoel* of Stars 'sniff out magic,' it is a fairly accurate metaphor: they do work like sniffing dogs. Throughout the last few days the girls have been walking around Caras Galadhon in a trance, feeling the air with outstretched palms, as if hunting a bird hiding in the fallen leaves or playing a game of 'hot-cold.' So far it was 'cold'—the magical object was somewhere very close but beyond their reach. That was as Eornis expected: she had been much more concerned with the Guards of the *clofoel* of Tranquility and their banal police methods than with the dancers' magic.

Danger sneaked up on the *clofoel* of the World from an unexpected

quarter. The *clofoel* of Might, left in charge during the Lady's expedition to Mirkwood (the old battleaxe, who never played his own games, was the only member of the Council she could really trust), took to his duties with excessive zeal. Among other things, his subordinates have replaced the Galadhon palace guard, so that one fine morning the bewildered *clofoels* discovered that they were not allowed to come into the Blue Hall for a Council session. All their attempts to reason with the new guards failed against their implacable "no such orders!" Of course, the misunderstanding was rectified right away, but now everyone was aware that nowadays the rules were being set by the *clofoel* of Might at his discretion until the Lady's return. Since the Lady had directly forbidden the *clofoel* of Stars to access the Mirror while she was away (a very sensible precaution), he simply barred all *clofoels* from the Moon Tower where the magical crystal was kept—"can't overdo a good thing." Should she fail to overcome this hurdle in the few remaining hours, her well-crafted plan will be for naught and nothing will save Eloar then . . .

"How is your search going, esteemed *clofoel* of Stars?" Eornis inquired with courteous indifference while they were taking their places around the Council table.

"Not good. I have asked you all to gather here for a much more grave reason . . ."

Eornis looked at the ruler of the magical forces of Lórien in amazement—the woman looked ill and her voice was strangely lifeless. It does look as serious as it can be, doesn't it?

"I will not bother you with a detailed description of our magical rituals, esteemed *clofoels* of the Council and you, o radiant Lord—we have too little time . . . perhaps no time at all. For about a week now the dancers and I have been feeling strange pulsations in the Mirror's magic field. First it was a light tremor, then it turned into real convulsions, and last night those convulsions assumed a definite and highly unpleasant rhythm . . . Do none of you feel anything?"

The *clofoel* of Memory broke the ensuing silence suddenly: "I feel it!" It was hard to tell what shocked the Council more—the report of the *clofoel* of Stars or this unheard-of breach of protocol. Formally all *clofoels* were equals, but never before did any of the lesser ones—all those palace librarians, nurses, and masters of ceremonies—dare interrupt the discussions of the Sovereigns and the Big Four. "It is exactly as you describe, o esteemed *clofoel* of Stars! But I didn't know it was caused by the Mirror . . ."

How would you ever know that, you timid mouse, Eornis thought irritably. What do you know but your dusty Beleriand scrolls and stupid sagas? But I—how did I fail to connect all those vibrations with the Mirror? So that's where my chills come from . . . The question is—do I acknowledge this fact and thereby assist that Star bitch? . . . Yes, and I should go even further, in fact.

"I believe that the esteemed *clofoel* of Memory has shown tremendous courage by openly stating what we all feel but are afraid to mention aloud. The feeling we are having is a strong irrational fear, is it not?"

"Maybe some girls feel strong irrational fear, but I personally fear not a damn thing, *clofoel* of the World! So don't you go around saying . . ."

"Thank you, esteemed *clofoel* of Might; we have taken your opinion into account. As I understand it, the other members of the Council share the opinion voiced by the esteemed *clofoel* of the World." The *clofoel* of Stars bowed slightly toward Eornis. "However, our fear is not irrational. The thing is that the Mirror . . . how should I explain this . . . it is somewhat alive. The pulsating rhythm it is now creating and we are feeling is well-known in magic: it is the rhythm of labor pains, but in reverse. It is a horrible thing. The Mirror is anticipating its demise and our World's with it . . . It is anticipating, and trying to reach out to us, do you see? And the stars over Lórien seem to have gone mad . . ."

The *clofoel* of Tranquility leaned forward: "Could this be related to the magical object your dancers can't find?"

"Yes, it could," the *clofoel* of Stars nodded glumly; she was obviously indisposed to develop this idea further and even refrained from adding something appropriate about the Guards having done no better.

"Wait, what does this mean—the demise of our World?" That was Lord Celeborn; imagine, the man actually woke up!

"Literally, o radiant Lord—one moment it exists, the other it doesn't, and we along with it."

"Then do something! *Clofoel* of Stars! You, too, *clofoel* of Tranquility! I . . . I order you as your Lord!"

What would we ever do without your orders, o precious liege—that was what showed clearly on the faces of the Big Four. The *clofoel* of Stars traded looks with the *clofoels* of the World and Tranquility, lingering a bit on the *clofoel* of Might, and finally uttered:

“First, o radiant Lord, I must take a look at the Mirror immediately, without delay.”

“Yes, of course! Go right away!”

So this is my end, thought the *clofoel* of the World detachedly, staring at the play of the shades of green in the emerald of her ring. I can make no objection to her suggestion—she played her cards well and the entire Council, including that doddering fool, is on her side . . .

However, just then a figure clad in shining armor, its size and delicacy of features resembling those of the stone idols guarding lower Anduin, loomed over the table. While Eornis wondered idly whether the *clofoel* of Might ever took off his helmet and *mithril* mail (to make love, say), the man informed them of his opinion of cowards and civvies—which are really one and the same to him!—in plain soldier’s language. He, for one, feels no such ominous rhythms, and how would the *clofoel* of Stars and her dancers know this childbirth rhythm, anyway? Aren’t they supposed to be virgins? In any case, he has a direct order of the Lady not to let the *clofoel* of Stars to the Mirror, and any attempt to violate that order will be treated as rebellion, with all that follows . . . Yeah, and what did you think, o radiant Lord?!

“Yes, yes,” mumbled the Lord of Lórien (obviously the inescapable wrath of the Lady scared him a lot more than any hypothetical end of the world), “let’s wait for her return from the Dol Guldur expedition . . .”

“Come to your senses, radiant Lord!” Amazed, Eornis stared at the *clofoel* of Memory—the poor woman must have lost all grip on reality to utter such unthinkable words. “Our world is already sliding into the abyss, the only one who has any chance of saving it is the *clofoel* of Stars, and this idiot of the shining helmet”[91] is standing on an order received in times immemorial! All right, can’t blame a man with a bronze lump for brains, but you all—Great Eru, can’t you rise above your petty intrigues even now, on the eve of destruction?!”

Suddenly Eornis realized that the timid book mouse has simply voiced what the entire dozen of lesser *clofoels* were thinking. Not just them, either, as became clear the next second when the enraged *clofoel* of Might tossed his chair aside—for the *clofoel* of Tranquility was already coming around the table towards him, stepping softly as a tiger, hand on the hilt of his sword and a smile fit to freeze the Eternal Fire on his lips.

“You’ve just mentioned rebellion, esteemed *clofoel* of Might . . .

that's an interesting thought, isn't it, o radiant Lord?"

"Hey, you . . . both of you . . ." the Lord mumbled pitiably and shrank in his chair: the lesser *clofoels* already backed to the walls, and . . .

"Stop!!" The solution that occurred to the *clofoel* of the World was akin to a flash of lightning: all the pieces of the puzzle she had been trying in vain to assemble suddenly fell into place in the only possible way. "I am speaking to you, *clofoel* of Might!"

He probably would not have listened to anyone else, but over the last few years' worth of intrigues the *clofoel* of the World had always taken the Lady's side, and thus had some influence over him.

"The radiant Lady did mention—in passing and half-jokingly—that the *clofoel* of Stars should not preen before her Mirror. However, she had imposed no restrictions on the other *clofoels'* access to the crystal. Do you agree, esteemed *clofoel* of Might?"

"Yes, that's true . . ."

"You see? It's settled, then: by the will of the Council I will ascend the Moon Tower. Of course, my magical abilities can't even be compared to the talents of the esteemed *clofoel* of Stars, but I'm at least capable of comprehensively reporting the Mirror's condition to her."

The *clofoel* of Stars shook her head. "Do you have any idea, esteemed *clofoel* of the World, how dangerous it is to look in the Mirror to anyone not protected by my magical talents, as you've referred to them?"

"I have no intention of looking in the Mirror—my selflessness doesn't go that far," laughed Eornis. "As far as I know, the radiant Lady uses Lórien's human visitors for this purpose; they are mortal anyway, sooner or later. We happen to have one handy—that flying Troll. I hope he hasn't been liquidated yet, has he, esteemed *clofoel* of Tranquility?"

"No, not yet. We'll have to fix him up some, though: when the poor slob read his testimony, he totally fell apart—first tried to kill himself, then went catatonic."

"That's no obstacle to what we need to do. So it's agreed—you will turn the Troll over to me before noon?"

"Agreed. However, esteemed *clofoel* of the World . . . I'm somewhat concerned for your safety. A Troll is a Troll—a wild and unpredictable creature. The three of us will go to the Moon Tower together—you, me, and him. That'll be safer."

“I am so touched by your concern, esteemed clofoel of Tranquility.”
“Not at all, esteemed *clofoel* of the World.”

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The sun was already approaching its zenith when they have passed the guards of the *clofoel* of Might at the entrance to the Moon Tower. The narrow spiral staircase forced them to go single-file. The *clofoel* of Tranquility went first, easily taking every other step; of course, he was not afraid of the Troll following him and had not even handcuffed him, relying on a Web spell instead. Milady Eornis brought up the rear, going over the details of her plan for one last time. Yes, there's a chance of success, but it's really minuscule, and the worst part is that everything depends on a myriad of coincidences, rather than her own abilities. In any event, her long game with the *clofoel* of Tranquility had reached its end—only one of them will be coming out of this tower, with only chance determining which one . . .

The top chamber of the Moon Tower was a round room about ten yards in diameter, the Mirror its only furniture. The crystal was set in a *mithril* setting with curved legs a foot and a half long, so that the whole thing resembled a small table. Six elongated windows offered an excellent view of Caras Galadhon. It's funny, Eornis reflected in passing, that this Troll is probably the only Man to ever see the real sight of the Elvish capital, but he won't relate it to anyone. Those guests that we intend to release are never allowed beyond the *talien* next to Nimrodel, so those simpletons leave believing that we actually live on those perches . . .

"Bring him up to the Mirror, *clofoel* of Tranquility, but don't remove the Web just yet . . ."

Only after uttering these words did the *clofoel* of the World realize that the Mirror was, indeed, in a bad way. The crystal was ink-black, the blackness lit up by pulses of scarlet light at regular intervals; it felt distinctly like the Mirror was emitting one endless silent scream of terror and pain. Maybe it's not good for it to be close to a *palantír*? she wondered belatedly. Whatever, can't change anything at this point. Please endure this a bit longer, she thought at the Mirror; this will all

be over in a few minutes. As if in response, the crystal almost exploded from inside with a singularly powerful scarlet flash which for some reason reminded her of the Eternal Fire . . . The thought came and went as other matters occupied her attention: the *clofoel* of Tranquility had apparently noticed (felt, to be precise) that the room was not as empty as it seemed. According to her plan, that was exactly what he was supposed to do, without any prompting from her. Imagine the irony of relying on one's mortal enemy's intuition and professionalism!

The *clofoel* of Tranquility had thoroughly scanned the room and saw nothing suspicious, as was to be expected. It's useless to search for anything magically here—the Mirror generates a magical field of such intensity as to drown those of all other objects. A totally empty room and a low 'table' on thin legs . . . Could I have hidden an object here, a small one? Yes, I could have . . . sure I could! Wait—a small object? What did the Troll say? "About the size of a child's head!" So that's why you wanted to get up to the Mirror!..

"*Clofoel* of the World! You're under arrest for treason. Stand against the wall!"

They stood facing each other, the Mirror between them; the *clofoel* of Tranquility had his sword out—he was not about to give that snake any chances, she was mortally dangerous as it was.

"Unclip the dagger from your belt . . . now the stiletto in your left sleeve . . . Kick them away with your foot! Now, we'll talk. The magic object that Star fool's dancers can't find is attached to the bottom of the 'table,' right? One has to drop on all fours before the Mirror to see it—surely no one will think of that. It's impossible to find it magically —the dancers are like a dog that has to find a perfumed handkerchief hidden in a sack of crushed pepper. An excellent idea, my compliments! By the way, what is it?"

"A *palantír*."

"Whoa!" He apparently never expected that. "Whose gift is it—the Enemy's?"

"No, Aragorn's."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's the truth. His Majesty Elessar Elfstone is a farsighted Man, he never puts all his eggs in one basket. You think you're the only who talked to him privately back in January? Get rid of me, and he won't help you in your game against the Lady."

"You're wrong, my dear: the fewer one's allies, the more valuable

they become, so he's not going anywhere. You, however, can look forward to a real education under the Mound: the boys there are quite creative, and I'll make sure you won't die too quickly."

"To do that you'll have to offer proof of my treason, which means turning the *palantír* over to the Council. Would it not be better to keep it and turn me into your agent in the Lady's retinue? I can offer a lot, you know."

"All right, enough talking! Face the wall, now! Sit down on the floor! On the floor, I said!

How did you attach it—with magic?"

"No, just the sticky *ankasar* juice," she replied, and then added pleadingly, staring at the wall: "Please listen to me . . ."

"Quiet!"

The last word came out slightly muffled: apparently, the *clofoel* of Tranquility behind her back had already bent over, feeling the bottom side of the crystal—meaning that it was time.

While pretending to conduct a pitiful loser's haggle, Eornis had been pushing through the dense crashing waves of the Mirror's magic field to the sticky gray ropes of the Web spell binding the Troll. Every spell carries an imprint of its caster, making him the only one able to lift it—doing so is a mortal danger to all others, and usually useless, too. Fortunately, the Web is one of the simplest spells, purely technical and almost bereft of a personality imprint, so it's worth a risk. Now everything will hinge on what the freed Troll will do. Of course, he's been broken by knowledge that he had somehow told everything he knew to the enemy; the question is—how broken? If he had turned into jelly, I'm finished; but if he's still a Man and would like to at least pay back the one who tricked him into a betrayal, I can help him. I help him, he helps me . . .

Suddenly Eornis ripped at the Web the way one rips a bandage stuck to a wound—in one swift movement, the only possibility here. A horrible pain knocked her out for a moment; so this is what lifting another's spell is like, even when it's a trifle like the Web being removed by an Elvish *clofoel* . . . By the time she surfaced from her unconsciousness a few seconds later, it was all over—the *clofoel* of Tranquility lay prone on the floor near the Mirror, his head turned at an unnatural angle, as if trying to see something behind his back.

The Troll must have fallen on the Elf kneeling before the Mirror from behind and simply wrung his neck with bare hands; he was now on a windowsill, clearly about to escape, which Eornis had no

intention of stopping. She smirked: the esteemed *clofoel* of Tranquility had released the Troll and imprudently looked away, while I had no time to do anything. It happened so fast, esteemed Members of the Council! I am eternally grateful to the late *clofoel*: had he not volunteered to accompany me, undoubtedly I would have been dead . . .

Kumai had only a split second to sweep his gaze over the amazing panorama of the Elvish capital while taking his last step; all those towers and suspension bridges fell on him like a theatrical decoration while six-sided flagstones raced at him. His last thought was: what if those bastards piece me together again?

Perhaps they would have (who really knows the limits of the Elves' power?), but they had no time left for that or anything else. The sun was already at zenith, so Eornis took the *palantír* out of its protective silver-shot sack and brought it right next to the maddened Mirror, which looked fit to gallop away on its bent little legs. After waiting the prescribed time, the *clofoel* of the World brought together the two orange sparks within the magic crystal, thus switching it to 'send-receive' mode . . .

CHAPTER 67

Arnor, the Tower of Amon Súl—Mordor, western edge of Orodruin

August 1, 3019 of the Third Age, a quarter-hour before noon

"Hold it!" Gandalf ordered in a voice hoarse with strain, as if he was supporting an immense weight—which he was, no matter that the weight was not a physical one. All the four wizards of the White Council were totally exhausted, sweat rolling down their wax-like faces as they were ready to collapse. This job really took a pentagram, but their numbers only sufficed for a square . . . ah, Saruman, Saruman!

A huge map of Middle Earth, drawn somewhat schematically but with careful attention to scale and orientation right on the flagstones, took up the entire floor. A *palantír* rested in its middle, which corresponded to Arnor, casting flashes of colored light—yellow, blue, greenish—haphazardly in all directions. The efforts of the White Wizards were not in vain, though—slowly the flashes merged into a steady emanation which then separated into needle-thin colored rays. Gandalf uttered a short 'fixing' spell, which served as a "Down!" command; the wizards repeated it in unison and let themselves relax, as if they have just put down a cupboard full of crystalware they have been carrying. The first part of the job was done.

The colored rays that now spread out across the floor and beyond the walls from the *palantír* in the center joined the crystal to the other six throughout Middle Earth. It was impossible to tell exactly where the other *palantíri* were, but to know the direction was also useful.

First, Gandalf studied the golden-yellow ray leading due west into the ocean. Yellow meant that the other Seeing Stone was in regular

working state, meaning that this was the *palantír* of Kirden the Shipbuilder, king of the Western Elves; the wizard made sure that the ray went through the part of Lindon shore where the Tower of Emyn Beraid stood and nodded in satisfaction: their map had been drawn accurately and they could go on.

The two clouded-green rays that formed an almost straight line, leading north-north-west to the Bay of Forochel in one direction and south-south-east to the delta of the Great River in the other, were of no interest to him: those were the sunk *palantíri,* the two on the lost ship of Prince Arvedui and the one carried by the Anduin from Osgiliath. The ones that had prompted this whole exercise were azure-blue (meaning that the *palantíri* were working but enclosed in silver-shot protective sacks) and led south-east, only very slightly apart. To Mordor. Damn it all!

"Where did they get a second crystal, Gandalf?"

"Look at the map—see any lines leading to Emyn Arnen? Looks like His Highness the Prince of Ithilien has kept up his pre-war games with the East and handed Denethor's *palantír* to those spawn of Morgoth, the asshole! I wish Aragorn had strangled him back at that hospital . . ."

"Now, now, Gandalf! What if Aragorn and Faramir had simply made a secret alliance against the Elves, using the remnants of the Orcs? Then it could've been Elessar Elfstone himself that gave the Minas Tirith *palantír* to the Orcs. I mean, everybody is now working against the Elves, including ourselves, just separately."

Even so, Gandalf thought in consternation, the overall picture is no clearer. Vakalabath's prophecy"[92] has many possible meanings, but it can be read as "Magic will depart Middle Earth with the *palantíri*"—today at noon—or not at all. How can this be? He stared at the dark-blue rays again: one goes through Barad-Dur and the eastern part of Núrnen, the other slightly to the west, through Gorgoroth and Orodruin . . . Orodruin?! So that is what they've decided to do!

Or, perhaps . . . no, there are no such coincidences! Looks like those Mordorian idiots have decided to drop their crystal into the Eternal Fire, thereby destroying it. What do they hope to accomplish? Sure, this will tweak the magic fields of the other *palantíri* and even the Mirror, but, really, not as drastically as to banish magic from Middle Earth! Even if another *palantír* that happens to be in receiving mode is destroyed at the same time . . .

"Gandalf, look! Something strange is happening to the eastern ray!"

The head of the White Council has already noticed something weird about the ray going through eastern Mordor: it started changing color and brightness at fixed intervals, as if storm clouds were moving across an evening sky.

"But that's impossible!" the wizard in the blue cloak spoke again. "There's only one thing in all of Middle Earth capable of influencing a *palantír*'s field—the Mirror. But the Mirror is with the Elves in Lórien while the *palantír* is in Mordor . . ."

A terrible guess pierced Gandalf's brain. "That *palantír* is not in Mordor," he rasped, pointing at the map. "Its ray goes through eastern Mordor, true, but first it goes through Caras Galadhon—look at the map!—and that's where it is, right by the Mirror!"

"Wait—could this be a coincidence? The Elves of Lórien have never had a *palantír*, and Kirden's is in place."

"They haven't before, but they do now! I don't know who made Lady Galadriel this gift—

Aragorn, Faramir, or the Orcs—but she put the crystals together for some reason. At noon the Orcs—or maybe they aren't Orcs, how am I to know?—will drop their *palantír* into Orodruin, the Eternal Fire will jump from the Orodruin *palantír* to the Lórien one and from there to the Mirror, and then it really will be all over! And when the Mirror is destroyed, all the other Seeing Stones will turn into clots of Eternal Fire, including ours." At those words the White wizards shrank back involuntarily, as if the deadly fire was already singeing their faces. "There's Vakalabath's prophecy for you! Make a triangle, quick! Help me—perhaps we'll be in time . . ."

Gandalf kneeled in front of the *palantír*. A dense chain of blue-violet sparks shimmered into existence between his palms, and he began winding it around the crystal exactly as if he was winding woolen thread into a ball; a tangy freshness came into the air, as if a lightning had struck somewhere nearby. The other three wizards have already poured all their power into the head of the White Council and now stood around him motionless and silent, like statues; none of them dared think of the all-consuming fiery dragon that could hatch out of its crystal egg at any moment. Gandalf's hands moved faster and faster; hurry, White Wizard, there's a lot at stake! A lot? How about everything?

Finally he sank to the floor and just sat there for a few seconds, eyes closed. He had to use his teeth to uncork the flask of Elvish wine —his hands were now forever numb, as if frozen.

Holding the flask between insensate palms, he drank a couple of swallows and handed the flask to Radagast without looking. They made it, despite everything . . . The ray of light going from their *palantír* to the one at Orodruin was now scarlet-purple rather than blue; the moment those guys take their crystal out of its protective silver net, Gandalf's spell will coil around it like a blue snake. He wouldn't want to be the one to touch that ball . . . Now it's time to catch my breath and consider how we might grab that *palantír* which will surely remain lying there among the rocks of Orodruin.

Haladdin tore himself away from contemplating the scarlet gold-tinged lava boiling almost at his feet in the crater. Squinting and shielding his eyes with his palm, he estimated the position of the sun, already a bit past noon. Lórien lies substantially to the west of Mordor, so noon at Orodruin should be about a quarter-hour before Lórien's. Looks like it's time to take the *palantír* out of its bag and wait for the Mirror to appear in it—provided that Kumai did his job . . . He rebuked himself: don't dare think that! You know with absolute certainty that he did everything exactly as requested. You can look forward to killing that woman—all right, Elf-woman, what's the difference—in just a few minutes. Well, that's been mulled over a thousand times. I suppose I could ask Tzerlag (there he is, snoozing by the rocks—nerves of steel!) to 'carry out the sentence,' but that'd be really . . .

The voyage to Orodruin was not too hard. Runcorn accompanied them to the Hotont pass—the ranger wanted to scout a good place for a house in the upper reaches of the Otter Creek anyway—where Matun met them. Matun viewed the rendezvous with 'Haladdin's scouting team' as a short vacation from the front lines—war still raged home in Mordor, whereas here, beyond the Mountains of Shadow, everything was nice and quiet. By that time Faramir had made every possible effort to make peace with the Shadow Mountain Trolls, fully succeeding in his diplomatic efforts last week when a delegation of three Trollish elders visited Emyn Arnen. Someone—let's not point fingers—did not like this rapport one bit, so a special assassination team waited for the elders at the outskirts of the Settlement.

However, Baron Grager's intelligence service acquitted itself admirably: not only did it avert the attempt, it proved that the provocation was directed from beyond the Anduin. The assassins that

survived the battle were let go with an order to ask His Majesty to vary his methods a bit. In any event, Grager's proofs were enough for the elders: they broke a traditional flatbread with the Prince of Ithilien and departed, leaving their younger sons to serve in the prince's personal guard as a sign of their covenant. By that time the Ithilienians have already established lively barter trade with the Trolls without waiting for any royal permissions. The Elves controlling the Cirith Ungol pass watched all that with hot fury but could do nothing about it—not enough manpower.

"How's Ivar doing, Matun? How's maestro Haddami—still amusing you all with his jokes?"

"Haddami got killed," the Troll answered solemnly. "Gods rest his soul, he was a worthy man, even though Umbarian . . ." He looked at Haladdin's face and mumbled in embarrassment: "My apologies, sir! I wasn't thinking. What about that Gondorian of yours?"

"He got killed, too."

"I see."

They only spent a few hours in Ivar's camp. The lieutenant tried several times to detail guards to accompany them to Orodruin ("It's real dicey on the plains right now, Easterling patrols are all over the place"), but the sergeant only chuckled: "You hear that, Matun?

They're gonna lead me through the desert!" He was right: helping an Orocuen in the desert is like teaching a fish to swim, and a smaller company is much better in their situation. So the two of them made the journey together, ending the way they started.

Yes, it was time. Haladdin untied the sack, pushed apart its stiff silver-embroidered sides and took the heavy crystal ball in his hands, looking for the orange sparks in its pale opalescent depths.

Here in Amon Súl the distant *palantír* at Orodruin was reflected as a large soap bubble some six feet in diameter. They could plainly see the unknown man turn the crystal around in his hands—huge images of hands moved around the surface of the ball, large and clear enough to read the palm lines.

"What's happening, Gandalf? Explain!" The wizard in the blue cloak could remain silent no longer.

"Nothing. That's the problem: nothing is happening." Gandalf's words had an even and lifeless quality. "My spell hasn't worked. I don't understand why."

“Then it’s all over?”

“Yes. It is.”

Silence reigned; everyone seemed to be listening to the sound of the last grains of sand streaming down the hourglass of their lives.

“Did you have a good time playing?” The voice that broke the silence was mocking, but still as beguiling as ever. “’History will vindicate me,’ eh?”

“Saruman?!”

The former head of the White Council was already heading into the hall with his firm wide stride, waiting for no permission or invitation, and everyone immediately felt that the term ‘former’ was absolutely inappropriate.

He looked intently at the rays of light emanating from the *palantír*. “Vakalabath’s prophecy, isn’t it, Radagast?” He addressed the forest wizard to the exclusion of all the other Council members. “Aha . . . this ray leads to Orodruin?”

“They want to destroy the Mirror,” a slightly revived Gandalf put in.

“Shut up,” Saruman told him without looking at him, and thrust his suddenly stone chin at the Lórien ray, which had just dimmed again: “There’s your Mirror—enjoy the sight, wannabe demiurge . . .”

“Can we help you, Saruman?” Radagast said soothingly, trying to mend bridges. “All our magic . . .”

“Yes, you can, by getting out of here immediately. Stick all your magic up your butts: haven’t you understood yet that the man on Orodruin is absolutely immune to magic? I will try reasoning with him logically, perhaps that will work . . . Move!” he yelled at the Council members milling uncertainly at the doors. “Get the hell out, I said! This place is going to blow so high, you’ll be collecting your balls for weeks!”

Paying no further attention to the quickly departing White wizards, he handled the *palantír* to put it into ‘send-receive’ mode and called softly: “Haladdin! Doctor Haladdin, can you hear me? Please respond.”

CHAPTER 68

A few excruciatingly long seconds passed before a surprised voice sounded from the depths of the *palantír*: "I hear you! Who's calling me?"

"I could have introduced myself as a nazgúl and you would have never known the lie, but I will not. I am Saruman, head of the White Council."

"The former head . . ."

"No, present." Saruman glanced over his shoulder at the white cloak abandoned by Gandalf in his haste lest the thing catch on something as he careened down the stairs. "For about three minutes already."

For a few seconds the *palantír* was silent.

"How do you know my name, Saruman?"

"There aren't that many people in Middle Earth who are absolutely closed to magic. It stands to reason that the Nazgúl would pick one such to implement Vakalabath's prophecy . . ."

"Pardon me?"

"There's an obscure ancient prophecy saying that one not-so-wonderful day 'magic will depart Middle Earth with the *palantíri*.' The date of this event is encoded in a complicated manner; we have been combining the numbers in that prophecy and expecting this event at several dates, but so far it has not happened. Today is one of those days, and as I understand it, the Nazgúl have decided to use Vakalabath to destroy the *palantíri* and the Mirror—'the World is Text . . . ' You will now drop your *palantír* into Orodruin, the *palantír* in Lórien will burn the Mirror with Eternal Fire, and the magical world of Arda will perish forever."

"Why would it perish?" the *palantír* asked after a second.

"Ah, I see. Apparently, you have dealt with Sharya-Rana, correct?"

"Why would you think so?" There was a hint of surprise in Haladdin's voice.

“Because that is his theory of Arda’s make-up: two worlds, a ‘physical’ one and a ‘magical’ one, joined through the Mirror. The Elves, having crossed from the other world into this one, will unavoidably undermine its very existence with their magic, so the Mirror should be destroyed in order to isolate those worlds to their mutual benefit. Close enough?”

“Do you mean to say that it’s all a lie?” Haladdin responded coldly.

“Not at all! It is one of the theories of the World’s structure, but no more than that. Sharya-Rana, whom I respect greatly, held this theory, but to act in accordance with it . . .”

“What do the other theories say? Please tell me, esteemed Saruman; we still have time.

When it’s time for me to drop the *palantír* into Orodruin, I’ll give you warning.”

“You are very gracious, Haladdin, thank you. Very well—the mainstream opinion is that the ‘physical’ and ‘magical’ worlds are indeed separate and the Mirror and the *palantíri* did indeed originate in the magical one, but they are not here, in the physical world, by chance.

Those crystals constitute the very foundation of that other world’s existence, like that fairy-tale needle—remember, the one hidden in an egg which is hidden in a duck which is hidden in a hare which is hidden in a chest? By destroying the Mirror with the *palantíri* you will simply destroy the entire magical world. The irony is that they have been placed in this non-magical world precisely for safekeeping, just like the chest in the fairy tale. Of course, you might say that these are that other magical world’s problems for which you care not. I have to disappoint you—the worlds are symmetrical.”

“You mean to say,” Haladdin spoke slowly, “that there’s something which is the basis of our world’s existence that’s been placed for safekeeping in that other, magical world? Our own needle in an egg and so forth?”

“Precisely. By destroying the other world you will doom ours. Sometimes twins are born conjoined; obviously, if one kills the other, he, too, will soon die of blood poisoning. When you drop the *palantír* into Orodruin’s maw, the other world will perish instantly, while this one will start dying a long and painful death. Nobody knows how long this dying will last—a minute, a year, a century—would you like to find out?”

“That’s if you’re right and Sharya-Rana is wrong.”

“Certainly. Have you decided to find out experimentally which theory is correct? A radical experiment, as they call it in your circles?”

The *palantír* was silent—Haladdin was at a loss for words.

“Listen, Haladdin,” Saruman continued with apparent curiosity, “have you really started all this to put the Elves in their place? Aren’t you overestimating their importance?”

“Something like this is better to overdo.”

“Then you do believe that the Elves are about to control the entire Middle Earth? My dear doctor, this is bizarre! Whatever the Elves’ capabilities are—and they are greatly exaggerated by rumor, believe me—there’s only about fifteen thousand of them, perhaps twenty thousand, in the entire Middle Earth. Think about it—a few thousand, and there will be no more; while there are millions of Men, and their numbers keep growing. Believe me that Men are already strong enough not to be afraid of Elves; this is some kind of an inferiority complex on your part!..”

Saruman continued after a pause: “Sharya-Rana is correct that our Arda is unique: it is the only World which allows direct contact between the physical and magical worlds, where their inhabitants—Elves and Men—can talk to each other. Just think of the possibilities this offers! In a very short time you and the Elves will live together in harmony, enriching each other with your cultural achievements.”

“Live as directed by the Far West?” Haladdin smirked.

“That depends on you. Do you really lack minimal self-respect, enough to think yourselves clay in the hands of some otherworldly forces? I’m honestly ashamed to hear this.”

“So a time will come when the Elves will look at Men as something other than dung under their feet? I wish I could believe you!”

“There was a time when Men would eat anyone not from their cave, but now you have learned to behave a little differently, haven’t you? That’s exactly how it will be with you and the Elves, if you give it time. You are so very different, and that’s precisely what makes you need each other, believe me.”

The *palantír* fell silent; Haladdin slumped as if a rod had been taken out of his spine.

“Who’s that, sir?” Tzerlag, standing some ten paces away, lower on the slope, looked at the crystal with superstitious fear.

“Saruman, Lord of Isengard, Head of the White Council, and so on and so forth . . . He’s trying to talk me out of dropping the *palantír* into the Eternal Fire, lest the whole world perish.”

“Is he lying?”

“I think so,” Haladdin answered after some thought.

In reality he was not sure of that at all; the opposite, in fact. Saruman could very well have said something like “the Nazgúl have lost the fight and decided to destroy the world with your hands on their way out” and persuasively corroborate that theory (how did Haladdin know that the Nazgúl were the good guys? Only from Sharya-Rana’s words); he could, but he did not, and somehow that fact made Haladdin trust everything the White Wizard was saying. “Have you decided to find out experimentally which theory is correct?” Yes, that’s how it comes out.

He has succeeded, Haladdin realized with horror. I have doubts, and therefore I have lost the right to act: to interpret doubt for the defendant’s benefit is too deeply ingrained in me.

To do what I intended while knowing of the possible consequences (which I now do, thanks to Saruman) one has to be either God or a madman, and I’m neither. Nor can I do it and say later that I was following orders—that’s not my style . . . Plus you really don’t want to fry that Elvish beauty with your own hands, right? Right, I don’t, to put it mildly—is that a plus or a minus?

Forgive me, guys . . . forgive me, Sharya-Rana, and you, Baron! (In his mind he went down on his knees.) Everything you’ve done has been for naught. I know that I’m betraying you and your memory, but the choice I have to make is beyond me . . . or any Man—only the One can make such a choice. All I can do is block my *palantír* from transmitting and drop it into Orodruin; let what may come do so without my participation. I’m not cut out to decide the fate of the World—I’m made from a different kind of clay . . . and should you want to say: from crap, not clay—I accept that.

As if to confirm this decision of his, the *palantír* suddenly lit up from the inside and showed him the interior of some tower with narrow windows, something resembling a low table on curved legs, and a deathly pale—and somehow even more beautiful for that—face of Eornis.

CHAPTER 69

It is truly amazing what trifles change the course of history sometimes. In this case the matter was decided by the interruption of blood flow to Haladdin's left calf muscle due to the uncomfortable position he had assumed over the past few minutes. The doctor got a cramp in his leg; when he got up awkwardly and leaned over to relieve the pain in his calf, the smooth globe of the *palantír* fell out of his hand and rolled slowly down the crater's almost-level outer slope. Tzerlag, who stood a little below, interpreted his commander's muffled oath as an order and lunged at the crystal ball . . .

"No-o-o-o-o!!" The frantic yell shattered the silence.

Too late.

The Orocuen grabbed the *palantír* and froze in an awkward pose; his body shimmered with bluish-purple sparks, as if frosted. Desperately Haladdin rushed to his comrade and knocked the devil's toy out of his hands without thinking, in one motion; it took him a couple of seconds to realize with astonishment that it had not harmed him.

The purple sparks went out, leaving a strange frosty smell behind, and the Orocuen fell slowly sideways onto the gravel; Haladdin heard a strange clunking sound. He tried to lift the sergeant and was amazed by his body's weight.

"Doctor, what's happening to me?" The Orocuen's face, usually expressionless or smiling, showed fear and bewilderment. "Can't feel my hands or feet . . . at all . . . what's happening?"

Haladdin took his wrist but jerked his hand back in surprise: the Orocuen's hand was cold and hard as stone . . . Merciful God, it *is* stone! A couple of fingers on Tzerlag's other hand broke off in the fall, and the doctor was now looking at the fresh break shimmering with tiny crystals—snow-white porous calcite of the bones and the darkly pink marble of the muscles shot with bright-red garnet of blood vessels—and marveling at the astonishing exactness of this stony imitation. The Orocuen's neck and shoulders were still warm and

living; feeling the arm, Haladdin realized that the boundary between stone and flesh was a bit higher than the elbow, slowly moving up the biceps. He was about to utter some comforting lie like ‘a temporary loss of sensation due to an electrical discharge,’ concealing the nature of the problem with fancy medical terminology, but the sergeant had already noticed his mangled hand and understood everything.

“Don’t leave me like this, hear? The strike of mercy—now’s the time . . .”

“What happened, Haladdin?” the *palantír* came to life with Saruman’s alarmed voice.

“What happened?! My friend is turning to stone, that’s what! Your work, bastards?”

“He touched the *palantír*?! Why did you let him . . .”

“Devil take you! Lift the spell right now, you hear?”

“I can’t do that. It’s not my spell—why would I need to do that?—and it’s impossible to lift someone else’s spell, even for me. It must have been how my stupid predecessors have tried to stop you.”

“I don’t care who did it! Do what you can or else drag the one who did it over to your *palantír*!”

“They’re all gone already . . . I regret this deeply, but I can do nothing for your friend even at the cost of my own life.”

“Listen, Saruman.” Haladdin managed to get hold of himself, realizing that yelling would accomplish nothing. “It looks like my friend will turn to stone in five or six minutes. If you manage to lift the spell during that time, I’ll do what you’re asking me to do: block this *palantír*’s transmission and throw it into Orodruin”[93]. How to do it is your problem, but if you can’t, I’ll do what I intended to do, although, to be honest, you’ve almost convinced me otherwise. Well?”

“Be reasonable, Haladdin! Would you destroy a whole World—two Worlds, actually—to save one man? It won’t even save him when he dies later together with the World . . .”

“I don’t give a shit about your worlds, understand?! For the last time—will you try or not?”

“I can only repeat what I’ve said before to those idiots of the White Council: ‘What you are about to do is worse than a crime. It is a mistake.’”

“Oh yeah? Then I’m dropping my ball into the crater! Run like hell if you can! You can figure yourself how many seconds you’ve got—I’ve never been good at figuring in my head . . .”

Wolverine, lieutenant of the Secret Guard, was also facing a difficult choice at about the same time.

He had already reached the shores of the Anduin and had a good chance of getting to the boat that would save him when the Elves dogging his heels managed to chase him onto a *kurum*[94]—a boulder-strewn slope that the real wolverines favor for their lairs. Trying to take a shortcut, the lieutenant ran straight across the *kurum*, leaping from boulder to boulder. It is most important to maintain one's momentum and never stop when moving like that—jump and bounce, jump and bounce. This is not too difficult in dry weather, but now, after several days of rain, the lichens covering every boulder with black and orange spots were water-logged, and every spot was mortally dangerous.

Wolverine had barely made it through a half of the slope when he realized that the pursuers were closer than he thought: arrows began falling around him. Those arrows arrived on high trajectories at the very end of their range, but the lieutenant knew too much of the Elves' skill—the best archers in Middle Earth—not to steal a glance backwards. After another leap he pushed off a large stone with his left foot while turning to the left—and that was when the soggy lichen, slippery as the proverbial banana peel, gave way under his Mordorian boot (I knew this hard-soled footwear would fail me!) and Wolverine was thrown to the right into a narrowing crevice. His breaking fingernails left rips across the lichen spots on the boulder, but could not hold him. A stupid thought flitted across the lieutenant's mind —"wish I were a real wolverine"—right before his right ankle, stuck in the crevice like in a steel trap, cracked and shot a bolt of pain through his spine, knocking him out.

. . . Strangely, his unconsciousness had lasted a very short time. Wolverine managed to prop himself up in the crevice so as to rest his weight on the uninjured leg. Now he could move his backpack over his head and in front of him. The sheaf of Dol Guldur papers had a bottle of *fire jelly* attached to it (praise Grizzly for thinking of everything!), so all he had to do now was strike a flint on the ignition charge—an air-tight porcelain bottle filled with the light fraction of naphtha. Only after untying the strap of the backpack and locating the flint in his pocket did he think to look around, leaning back (it was impossible to turn around) just in time to see column-like figures in gray-green cloaks kind of slowly falling on him from the pale noon sky. With mere meters separating him from the pursing Elves, the

lieutenant knew with certainty that of the two duties left to him in this life—setting off the ignition charge and chewing the green pill of salvation—he only had time to perform one, and an officer of Task Force Féanor should know which one took priority . . . So it was that the last sight Wolverine saw before a blow to the head knocked him out was that of the bluish naphtha flame licking the slightly frayed saltpeter-soaked fire cord.

He came to in a large clearing with a good view of the valley of the Great River. His hands were tied behind his back, his Mordorian uniform was all singed tatters, and the entire left side of his body was one large burn—the device worked, praise Aulë! Belatedly he saw an Elf squatting to the left of him, on the side of the eye almost covered with dried lymph. The Elf was disgustedly wiping his flask with a rag —apparently, he had just been pouring Elvish wine down the prisoner's throat.

"You awake?" the Elf inquired in a melodious voice.

"Mordor and the Eye!" Wolverine responded automatically (imagine dying as an Orc! Well, them's the breaks . . .)

"Quit pretending, dear ally!" The Firstborn was smiling, but his eyes burned with such hatred that his vertical cat's pupils narrowed into tiny slits. "You are going to tell us everything about those strange games of His Majesty Elessar Elfstone, aren't you, beastie?

There shouldn't be any secrets between allies."

"Mordor . . . and . . . the Eye . . ." The lieutenant's voice was still even, although Manwe only knew the effort it took: the Elf had casually dropped his hand to the prisoner's broken ankle and . . .

"Sir Engold, look! What's that?!"

At the cry of his comrades the Elf turned around and stared, frozen, at something resembling a colossal dandelion swiftly grow to the sky beyond the Anduin, right where Caras Galadhon ought to be—a thin blinding-white stalk crowned with a bright-red bulbous 'flower.' Almighty Eru, if this thing is indeed in Galadhon, how huge must it be? What Galadhon? There's probably not even ashes left there . . . A strangled cry made him turn back: "Sir Engold, the prisoner! What's happening to him?.."

Fast as he turned back, it was all over before he could see it happen. The prisoner was dead and no physician was necessary to confirm that. In a few moments, right under the gaze of the astonished Elves, the man had turned into a skeleton covered here and there in remnants of mummified skin. The brown-yellow skull, its eye sockets

filled with sand, grinned at Engold from between shrunken blackened lips, as if mockingly inviting him to ask his questions—immerse me in the truth potion, perhaps that will help?

And in the palace in Minas Tirith Aragorn watched in astonishment the subtle changes taking place in the face of Arwen, seated across from him. Nothing seemed to change, really, but he felt with absolute certainty that something important, perhaps the most important, was going, slipping away like a blissful morning dream slips from memory . . . some magical incompleteness of her features, which became completely human. When this metamorphosis was over in a few moments, he reached a verdict summing up that period of his life: a beautiful woman, no question about it. Very beautiful, even. But that's all.

None of his subjects saw that, nor would they have ascribed any importance to it had they seen it. What they did dutifully reflect in the chronicles of that day was another event of that noon: when the Mirror was destroyed in Lórien, the other six *palantíri* remaining in Middle Earth detonated, too, and a monstrous geyser almost half a mile high shot up from the Anduin-receiving Bay of Belfalas. The geyser spawned a forty-foot tsunami that wiped out several fishing villages together with their inhabitants; it is doubtful that anyone recognized that those unfortunates, too, were victims of the War of the Ring.

The most surprising thing is that despite his powers of observation and insight His Majesty Elessar Elfstone had not connected those two events that happened at noon of August the first of the Year 3019 of the Third Age and in a sense became its final moment, either. For sure, no one after him had ever connected them, having had no opportunity to do so.

"Bend the arm, quick!" Haladdin ordered, tightening the tourniquet above Tzerlag's left elbow. "Keep the rag pressed there, lest you bleed out."

The sergeant's hand 'unfroze' the moment the volcano swallowed the *palantír*, so now his blood gushed like it always does when a man loses a couple of fingers. They had no means to stop the bleeding other than the tourniquet: it turned out that the blood-clotting medicines from the Elvish medkit, including the legendary mandrake root (which reputedly could even patch a severed artery), have

stopped working entirely. Who would have thought that this was magic, too?

“Listen . . . so we won, right?”

“Yes, dammit! If it can be called victory . . .”

“I don’t understand, Field Medic, sir . . .” it seemed that the sergeant’s lips, gray with blood loss, had trouble obeying him. “What does ‘if it can be called victory’ mean?”

Don’t you dare, Haladdin told himself. That had been my decision; I have no right to burden anyone else with it, not even Tzerlag, not even a tiny bit. He should not even suspect what he had just witnessed and indirectly caused, for his own good. Let all this remain our Dagor-Dagorlad to him—a victorious Dagor-Dagorlad . . .

“What I mean is . . . The thing is, not a soul in Middle Earth will believe in our victory. No victory parades, you know? Mark my words: the Elves and the Men from beyond the Anduin will find a way to paint themselves as the victors, anyway.”

The Orocuen nodded and held still for a moment, as if listening to the slowly subsiding growl of the Fire Mountain. “Yeah. That’s how it’s gonna be, no doubt. But what do we care?”

EPILOGUE [95]

"What will History say?"[96]
"History, sir, will lie—as always."
Bernard Shaw

Dare to err and to dream.[97]
Friedrich Schiller

Our narrative is based entirely on Tzerlag's detailed tales, however incomplete, that are preserved by his clan as an oral tradition. It should be stressed that we have no documents that might attest to their veracity. The person who might have been expected to leave the most thorough account—Haladdin—had recorded not a word on the subject; the other participants in the hunt for Galadriel's Mirror—Tangorn and Kumai—remained silent for obvious reasons. Therefore, whoever would like to declare the whole thing to be the old-age demented ravings of an Orc who wanted to recast the finale of the War of the Ring is free to do so with clear conscience. After all, that's what memoirs are for: to let veterans turn their losses into victories after the fact.

On the other hand, those who consider this story to be, if not a true, then at least a plausible version of history, might be interested in certain events outside its immediate time frame. Tzerlag related that he had accompanied Haladdin from Orodruin to Ithilien; the doctor seemed very ill and didn't say ten words in a row throughout the journey. On one of their stops the sergeant fell in a sleep so deep that he woke up only by next evening, nauseous and with a monster headache. Instead of his comrade he found the *mithril* mail by his side, with a farewell letter wrapped in it. Haladdin wrote that Middle Earth was now free from the Elvish menace and that in his capacity as the

commanding officer of the operation he thanked the sergeant for excellent service and awarded him the precious armor. As for the doctor himself, regretfully he had “paid such a price for victory as to see no place for himself among people.” Those words led the scout to fear the worst, but fortunately, the hunch did not pan out: judging by his tracks, Haladdin had simply reached the Ithilien highway and took it to points south.

Interestingly, a few years ago a certain light-minded doctoral student at the Umbar University’s Medieval History Department took this legend at face value and invested the effort to comb the account books of several Eastern monasteries, which have been keeping records for the last fifteen hundred years with an unnatural meticulousness. Guess what—the smart aleck did unearth a very curious coincidence: in January 3020 (by the then current calendar) an Umbarian-looking man did join the Gurwan Aren cave monastery in the mountains of North Vendotenia. The new monk took an oath of silence and donated an inoceramium ring to the monastery. This led the student to make (to quote the minutes of the departmental meeting) “a hasty, unfounded, and completely unscientific claim of identity of the said monk and the legendary Haladdin.” Naturally, the doctoral committee administered a proper tongue-lashing to the wannabe ghost-hunter, so that the young man forswore departures from his approved dissertation topic and has been dutifully dusting clay fragments from the garbage piles of Khand’s Seventh Dynasty ever since.

As for the real Haladdin, his name can be found in any university course on history of science—as an example of the dangers of sudden leaps forward—rather than physiology, his life’s work. His brilliant studies of nerve tissue function had been so far ahead of his time as to fall out of scientific context and be forgotten. Only three centuries later did the medics of the Ithilien School come across his works accidentally while searching for ancient antidote recipes. It became clear then that Haladdin had beaten the famous Vespuno by more than a hundred years; not only did he prove experimentally the electric nature of axon stimulation, but he also predicted the existence of neurotransmitters, and even modeled how they should work. Unfortunately, only historians are interested in the ‘who was there first’ kind of things; the scientific community has no use for this information. In any event Haladdin’s last known work is dated year 3016 of the Third Age and the official version is that he perished

during the War of the Ring.

Let's go back to Tzerlag, whose historicity is beyond doubt. As is known, the occupation of Mordor ended suddenly and inexplicably by the winter of 3020, and life there started slowly getting back to normal. The city population had suffered tremendous losses (strictly speaking, the Mordorian civilization had not fully recovered since then), but the nomads have mostly avoided those tribulations. The sergeant used to say that a real man whose hands are attached properly (rather than to his butt) will come out on top whatever the situation, and proved this maxim with his entire life. After returning to his home grounds, he ended up the founder of a large and powerful clan, which had preserved the tale of his journeys in its oral tradition, as is customary with nomadic peoples.

Incidentally, the fate of the other sergeant, Runcorn, was almost the same as Tzerlag's, aside from the fact that the ex-ranger lived on the other side of the Mountains of Shadow in the valley of the Otter Creek, rather than on the Morgai plateau. The hamlet he built under a strange name *Lianica* had grown into a regular village in only five years. When his little son found Ithilien's first gold nugget in the creek's gravel bed while fishing, the neighbors only shrugged: money always attracts money. Had he and the Orocuen met in their old age, undoubtedly they would have put their Mirkwood debates on the comparative advantages of dark beer and *kumiss* to a practical test, but it was not to be.

Tzerlag had decided to return the *mithril* coat to Haladdin's girl together with the tale of his vanished friend's heroic achievement. But Kumai had perished, and the scout himself knew nothing of the girl beside the name Sonya (very common among Trolls) and vague knowledge of her participation in the Resistance, so all his efforts to locate her failed. The despairing Orocuen then decided that he and his clan were the keepers rather than the owners of the artifact; the nomads' punctiliousness in such matters is truly without limit. The sergeant's great-great-grandson ended up donating it (together with the associated headaches) to the Núrnen History Museum, where anyone can see it today together with the other relics of the mysterious Mordorian civilization. At this point the apologist for the legend might say: "Aha! Isn't the coat of mail proof enough for you?" The grave and absolutely correct answer would be that the coat proves nothing even within Tzerlag's narrative, since Haladdin had obtained it before receiving the nazgúl's ring.

By the way, concerning *mithril* . . . There is a total of four such coats of mail in the museums of Arda, but the technology of their manufacture remains a mystery. If you want your metallurgist friend to throw something heavy at your head, ask him about this alloy. It's been analyzed to death: 86% silver, 12% nickel, plus trace amounts of nine rare metals from vanadium to niobium; they can measure these proportions to the ninth digit after the decimal, X-ray its structure, and do a myriad other things, except reproduce it. Some say (not without a trace of mockery) that the old masters would supposedly forever invest a fraction of their souls in each batch of *mithril*, and since today there are no souls, but only the 'objective reality perceived by our senses,'[98] by definition we have no chance to obtain true *mithril*.

The most recent attempt at a solution had been undertaken by the smart guys at the Arnor Center for High Technologies with a special grant from Angmar Aerospace. It all came to naught: the grantor was presented with a plate of some alloy two millimeters thick (86.12% silver, 11.96% nickel, and so forth) and told that this was real *mithril* and everything else was just legends. As usual, the smart guys then asked for another grant to study this creation of theirs. Without blinking an eye the boss of the rocket men produced a loaded museum crossbow from under his executive desk, aimed it at the project leader and suggested that he protect himself with his plate—if it holds, you get your money, if it doesn't, you won't need it. Unsurprisingly, that was the end of the project. I have no idea whether this actually happened, but those who know the CEO of Angmar Aerospace well insist that the joke would be quite in his taste—not for naught does he trace his lineage from the Witch-king.

The deal with inoceramium that supposedly served to make the rings of the Nazgúl is much simpler, and the reason people don't often see it is obvious. This metal of the platinum group is not only extremely rare in Arda's crust (4×10^8 atoms; compare gold at 5×10^7 or iridium at 1×10^7 atoms)—unlike the other platinoids it is never found scattered, but only in large nuggets. You can figure out the probability of finding one such yourself. Actually, not too long ago a nugget weighing a fantastic 87 ounces was found in Kigvali mines in South Harad; the headline in the local paper was *Find of the Century—Six Pounds of Inoceramium Would Make Enough Rings for a Platoon of Nazgúl*. This metal has absolutely no unusual properties other than its density (higher than osmium).

But enough about metals.

Alviss never married. She dwelt in self-imposed isolation in her Jasper Street mansion, dedicating her life to raising the son she bore at the appropriate time after those events. This boy grew up to be none other than Commodore Amengo—the one whose voyages are universally considered to have ushered in the era of great geographical discoveries. The Commodore had left behind the maps of the shore of a new continent that was to bear his name, wonderful (in a literary sense) travel notes, and a long train of broken hearts—none of which brought him any marital happiness. Aside from the great western continent (which was long believed to be the legendary Far West, with resultant attempts to discern Elvish features in its aborigines), Amengo's list of discoveries includes a small tropical archipelago which he had deservedly named Paradise. The name was changed later by the Holy Church (the local girls looked like the living, breathing *houranies* as portrayed by the godawful Hakimian heresy), but the two biggest islands of the archipelago, whose shapes closely resemble the yin-yang symbol, have managed to keep the names given them by the discoverer: Alviss and Tangorn.

By my lights the famous seafarer had immortalized his parents' names in the best possible way. Nevertheless, the love story of the Umbarian courtesan and the Gondorian aristocrat had been a favorite topic of writers ever since. For some reason these people either turn the protagonists into disembodied romantic ghosts or else reduce everything to primitive erotica. Alas, the recent Amengian screen version—*The Spy and The Whore*—is no exception: it was rightfully rated XXX in Gondorian theaters and banned outright in puritanical Angmar. The movie's artistic merits are scant, but it's totally politically correct: Alviss is black (excuse me—Haradi-Amengian), and the relationship between Tangorn and Grager has distinct gay overtones. The critics predicted as one man that the judges of the Silver Harbors Film Festival would protect themselves from the charges of racism, sexism, and other horrible 'isms' by throwing every conceivable award at it, which is exactly what happened. In any event, the inimitable Gunun-Tua's *Golden Elanor* for Best Actress was well-deserved.

Almandin and Yakudze were hanged in the courtyard of the Ar-Horan prison on one of the exhaustingly muggy August nights of 3019; along with them were executed Flag Captain Makarioni and seven other naval officers that had led the 'Admiral Carnero's mutiny.'

That was the *post factum* description of Operation Sirocco[99], during which the admiral first destroyed the entire Gondorian invasion fleet right at the piers in a pre-emptive strike, and then landed a raiding party which burned Pelargir shipyards to the ground. To save face, Aragorn had to sign the Dol Amroth Compact. By its terms Umbar did acknowledge itself "an inseparable part of the Reunited Kingdom," but got itself permanent free city status in return. Its Senate was renamed to 'magistrate council' and its army to 'garrison;' Special Envoy Alkabir, who represented the Republic, even managed to wangle a special provision banning His Majesty's Secret Guard from operating in its territory. To the mutual satisfaction of the king of Gondor and Umbarian senators, Admiral Carnero's raid was declared to have been a banal pirate foray, its participants deserters and traitors who had forsaken their military oath and officer's honor.

Of course, the people viewed Carnero's co-conspirators (the admiral avoided court-martial by getting himself killed at Pelargir) as heroes who had saved their Motherland from foreign enslavement, but the fact remained that they had gone against orders. The Republic's Prosecutor General Almaran had a simple solution to this ethical dilemma: "Winners are always right, you say? Like hell! Either law exists and is the same for everybody, or there's no law at all." The pathos of his prosecutor's speech (quoted in whole or in part in every modern law textbook) can be summed up exhaustively by its historic concluding statement: "Let justice be done though the heavens fall!"[100] Be that as it may, the executed officials of the Umbarian secret service should have known better than anyone else that motherland's gratitude usually takes strange forms . . .

Sonya never found out about Haladdin's mission (as we already know, this had been his special concern) and remained certain that he and Kumai had perished on the Pelennor Fields. But time is merciful, so once those wounds had healed she fulfilled her life's destiny by becoming a loving wife and wonderful mother, having married a worthy man whose name is absolutely irrelevant to our story.

In my opinion, royal personages are of much lesser interest, since their fates are well-known. For those too lazy to pick up a book or at least review their sixth-grade history lessons, let me remind you that Aragorn's reign was one of the most magnificent in Middle Earth history and one of the watershed events separating the Middle Ages (the Third Age) from modernity. The usurper did not try to win the affections of the Gondorian aristocracy (such a project would have

been dead on arrival), instead betting correctly on the third estate, which cared for things like tax rates and safety of trade routes, rather than dynastic rights and other such phantoms. Since His Majesty had effectively burned all bridges with the aristocracy, paradoxically this gave him freedom to implement radical agrarian reform, drastically curtailing the rights of landlords in favor of freeholders. These factors were the basis for the famous 'Gondorian economic miracle' and the colonial expansion that soon followed, while the representative legislative bodies Aragorn had created to counterbalance the aristocracy have survived to our day almost unchanged, earning the Reunited Kingdom its well-deserved title of Middle Earth's oldest democracy.

It is common knowledge that the king promoted and supported science, crafts, and sea-faring ventures, appointed talented men to important state positions without regard to their lineage, and was sincerely loved by his subjects. The only dark stain on Elessar Elfstone's reputation is the early period of his reign, when his Secret Guard (admittedly a really scary outfit) had to protect the throne from the feudal lords with an iron hand; actually, most of today's experts believe that the scale of terror[101] had been greatly magnified by the nobility's historians. Aragorn's famously beautiful wife Arwen (Elven-born, according to legend) played no role in matters of state and only imparted a certain mysterious luster to his court. They had no children, so the Elfstone dynasty ended with its founder, the throne reverting to the Prince of Ithilien—in other words, things went back to the way they were.

It is rather hard to analyze the reign of the first Princes of Ithilien, Faramir and Éowyn, in political or economical terms—it appears that they had neither politics nor economics over there, but only a never-ending romantic ballad. Nearly all the contemporary poets and painters must have contributed to the creation of the captivating image of the Fairy of the Ithilien Woods (weird, isn't it—Ithilien, the industrial heart of Middle Earth, had forests once!), since Faramir's modest court had become a sort of a holy shrine to them, and not making a pilgrimage there was the height of bad taste. But even correcting for the unavoidable idealization, one has to admit that Éowyn must have been an exceptionally pure soul.

Thanks to that army of artists we have several portraits of Prince Faramir, too; the best one I know of is reproduced in a monograph entitled *Philosophical Agnosticism and its Early Adepts* recently printed

by the Amon Súl Tower Publishers in Annúminas. In any event, none of those images have anything in common with the brass profile gracing the cockades on the mustard-colored berets worn by the commandos of the Ithilien Paratrooper Regiment. By the way, the famous 'mongooses'—a special anti-terrorist unit whose soldiers were on every TV screen in Arda recently when they brilliantly freed the passengers of a Vendotenian airliner captured in Minas Tirith airport by the Hannani fanatics from the Northern Mingad Liberation Front—are part of that regiment, as well.

Faramir had committed exactly one act of foreign policy during his entire reign—he approved Baron Grager's request to send him south of the Harnen River to conduct a series of intelligence and sabotage operations he had devised: ". . . by all indications the fate of Middle Earth will be decided, and soon, in Near Harad." Strangely, the subsequent fate of Grager of Aran[102] (often called, not without justification, the savior of Western civilization) remains the stuff of unverified legends and anecdotes. The only thing that is known is the end result of his efforts—the massive rebellion of nomadic Aranians against their Haradi masters, which had led, domino-fashion, to the fall of the entire ominous Harad Empire and its fracturing into an ineffective bunch of warring tribes. Nobody knows how this adventurous intellectual had earned his iron-clad authority among the fierce savages of the Harnen savannah. The fairy tale of him accidentally ransoming a son of an Aranian chieftain at a slave market in Khand appears entirely unreliable; the suggestion that his path to power lay through chief priestess Svantatra's[103] bed is cute and romantic, but people familiar with the realities of the South can only laugh at it. Even the manner of the baron's death is uncertain: either he perished in a lion hunt, or was killed accidentally while mediating a conflict over summer watering-hole rights between two small Aranian clans.

But the fate of Éomer[104] is so incredible that some researchers are still trying to prove that he was a legend rather than a real person. Having ascended to the throne of the Mark of Rohan after the Mordorian campaign, he had discovered—to his surprise and acute displeasure—that there was no one left to fight any more, at least in the near Middle Earth. For some time the famed warrior had tried to amuse himself with tournaments, hunts, and amorous adventures, but quickly tired of it all and fell into depression. (Historical veracity impels me to admit that on the battlefields of love this *chevalier sans*

per et sans reproche was characterized by a total lack of taste combined with a fantastic appetite, so much so that Edoras wags suggested that their monarch's motto should be 'one for all.') That was when the involuntarily idle king remembered a certain marvelous eastern faith that had led him to victory on the Field of Pelennor. At first Éomer wanted to make Hakima the state religion of Rohan, but then he came up with a more interesting plan.

At that time the Khand Caliphate was in the middle of an anemic religious war between two sects of Hakimians. It is still uncertain how Éomer decided which one of those was the one true faith. Personally, I suspect that he flipped a coin—the actual dogmatic differences thereof were and are a fertile field for scores of Doctors of Divinity. Be that as it may, he converted his entire Royal Guard, bored silly and ready to fight anyone at all, to that true faith (legend has it that one of Éomer's knights, when asked how he felt on the path of True Faith, responded guilelessly: "Not bad, praise Tulkas—my boots aren't leaking") and went South. The king left his cousin-twice-removed as regent in Edoras; sure enough, this plunged the country into dynastic struggles that lasted almost a century and culminated in the War of Nine Castles[105], which wiped out the entire knighthood of Rohan.

To the total astonishment of his companions, once in Khand Éomer actually did renounce his previous life as sinful, gave all his possessions but the sword to the poor, and joined the order of Hannanites (warrior dervishes). Utilizing his commander's talent in the service of his chosen sect, he crushed the opposition in three decisive battles, ending the twenty-six-year 'holy war' in only six months; the faithful Hakimians[106] deservedly dubbed him The Prophet's Sword, while the schismatics called him God's Wrath. At the end of the third battle, when the heretics' imminent defeat was beyond doubt, Éomer was killed by a stone from an enemy catapult—truly the best death a genuine warrior may wish for. The Hakimians promptly canonized him as a holy martyr, so he should have no problems obtaining the companionship of *houranies*.

This looks like a good place to stop . . . In conclusion, I would like to stress that I have filled the gaps in Tzerlag's story at my own discretion. The old soldier bears no responsibility for my inventions, especially since many will now passionately charge the storyteller—who else?—with deviating from the mainstream version of the events of the end of the Third Age. One has to note that the public's knowledge of those events is usually derived from the literary

adaptation of the Western epos—*The Lord of the Rings*—at best, but often only from the *Sword of Isildur* TV series and the *Galleries of Moria* first-person shooter game.

I might sonorously remind such critics that *The Lord of the Rings* is the historiography of the victors, who had a clear interest in presenting the vanquished in a certain way. Had genocide taken place back then, after the Western victory (where did those peoples vanish if it hadn't?), then it's doubly important to convince everybody, including oneself, that those had been orcs and trolls rather than people. Or I could ask them: how often do we find in human history a ruler that would relinquish his power, for free, to some nobody from nowhere (pardon me—a Dúnadan from the North)? Yet another subject of immodest curiosity might be the actual payment Elessar Elfstone had to make to the marvelous companions he had acquired on the Paths of the Dead. I mean, summoning the powers of Absolute Evil (for a noble cause, of course) is totally commonplace, he's neither the first nor the last; but for those powers to meekly revert back to nothingness after doing their job without asking anything in return sounds highly dubious. At least I've never heard of such a thing. Or I can . . . I can, but I won't. Whatever for? I have no desire to engage in this sort of polemics.

In other words, guys, live and let live. In our case it translates to this: you don't have to listen to me spin tall tales if you don't like them.

THE END

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

Quote Attributions, Historical and Cultural References, and Translator's Notes

TITLE

The term 'Ringbearer' in the title of this work is a re-translation of the word used to translate the term 'Ring-wraith' in the most popular rendering of *The Lord of the Rings* into Russian. This loads the Russian version of the title with double meaning, referring at once to the nazgúl ring Haladdin carries and to the way his mission parallels Frodo's in *The Lord of the Rings*. Obviously, this nuance is lost in English translation.

EPIGRAPH

[1] **"No indeed! We are not strong . . ."**—Rudyard Kipling, *Song of Picts*.

[2] **"Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few"**—Winston Churchill, referring to the deeds of British fighter pilots in a speech on 20 August 1940.

PART I

[3] **Vae Victis**—"Woe to the vanquished" (Latin).

[4] **"Gold is for the mistress . . ."**—Rudyard Kipling, *Cold Iron*.

CHAPTER 1

[5] **Hamada (Arabic)**—a type of desert landscape consisting of largely barren, hard, rocky plateaus, with very little sand. A hamada

may sometimes also be called a *reg* (pronounced “rug”), though this more properly refers to a stony plain rather than a highland. Hamadas exist in contrast to ergs, which are large areas of shifting sand dunes. (Wikipedia)
[6] **Orocuen**—author’s reconstruction of the name that got shortened to “Orc”; meant to evoke Araucanian Indians.
[7] **Bactrian (Arabic)**—camel; usage mimics Tolkien’s avoidance of the term ‘elephant.’
[8] **Haladdin**—the name is meant to evoke Aladdin and Saladdin (Salah-ad-din), the foe of the Crusaders.

CHAPTER 2

[9] **Garden of Thirteen Stones**—a type of Japanese garden containing thirteen stones, placed so that only twelve are visible from any vantage point.
[10] **Manna**—actual common name of edible lichen *Lecanora esculenta*.
[11] **Abo**—author’s play on ‘obo,’ a small stone pyramid the Mongols erect as shrines to spirits.
[12] **Tzandoi**—invented word.
[13] **Mantzag**—invented word.

CHAPTER 3

[14] **The agricultural debacle** described in this chapter is modeled on the one caused in the kingdom of Babylon by irrigation engineers imported by Egyptian Princess Nitocris.
[15] **“World’s Smithy”**—England’s designation at the height of Industrial Revolution.
[16] **“A state that is unable to feed itself and is dependent on food imports cannot be considered a formidable foe”**—a statement variously attributed to Winston Churchill and Henry Kissinger regarding the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER 4

[17] **“There are things more important than peace and more terrible than war”**—the first part of this statement was made by

Alexander Haig, Secretary of State in the Reagan administration, during his confirmation hearings.
[18] **"What you are about to do is worse than a crime. It is a mistake."**—Joseph Fouché, Napoleon Bonaparte's Minister of Police, reportedly said something similar regarding the planned assassination of Enghien, Duc d'Otrant. The quote is also sometimes attributed to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand or Antoine Boulay de la Meurthe.

CHAPTER 6

[19] **"Strange war"**—a reference to the stand-off between British and German armies in 1939.
[20] **"Land for peace"**—the modality of negotiations between Israel and its enemies following the 1967 Six-day War.

CHAPTER 7

[21] **Commander-South**—this construction for "Commander of the South Army" mimics Soviet terminology of the 1917 Civil War (which was typically portrayed romantically in Soviet propaganda), with its penchant for abbreviations.

CHAPTER 8

[22] **"We're all mortal, guys"**—a hint at Friedrich II of Prussia's famous "Dogs, do you want to live forever?"
[23] **Houranie**—a derivation from "houri."

CHAPTER 10

[24] **Teshgol boundary**—a boundary (sometimes called a tract) is a geographical term that denotes a parcel of land that is markedly different from the surrounding landscape, a wooded depression in this case.
[25] **"Mop-up"**—the author's intent was to use the American Vietnam-era term "sweep and clear," which the Russian Army had adopted during the Chechen War to mean wholesale destruction of civilian population. Since such connotation is missing from contemporary American English, I have decided to substitute it.

[26] **The set-up with a prisoner** buried in the sand up to his neck and left to die may be meant to invoke a similar situation in a cult Soviet "eastern" movie "The White Sun of the Desert."

CHAPTER 11

[27] **"I swear by near and by far"**—Alexander Pushkin, *Imitation of the Quran*.
[28] **"The World is Text"**—a reference to Umberto Eco's "open text" philology.
[29] **"Edge against edge"**—a cliché popular in Maoist propaganda, denotes a forceful response.

CHAPTER 12

[30] **"If you're weak, show strength to the foe"**—Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*.

CHAPTER 15

[31] **Vendotenia**—the author's creation, a country south-east of Mordor.
[32] **"*The Natural Basis of Celestial Mechanics*. . . theology"**—a reference to Sir Isaac Newton, supposedly a member of Prince Ashoki's secret order whose goal was channeling science into peaceful applications.

CHAPTER 16

[33] **Law of causality**—a fundamental principle of physics that rules out the possibility of a given event affecting any preceding ones.
[34] **Twin-key principle**—an approach to security in which it takes two keys, held by distinct persons, to open a lock.

CHAPTER 17

[35] **". . . find a hidden object with a frame"**—one of the methods used by "biolocators," people supposedly capable of locating aquifers, ore deposits, and the like when walking over them holding a wooden

or metal frame, which rotates toward the sought object.
[36] **"Searching a dark room for a black cat that's not even there"**—a reference to a series of quotes, variously attributed, regarding mathematicians, philosophers, and theologians. One of the best known is by H.L. Mencken: "A philosopher is a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there. A theologian is the man who finds it."

PART II

[37] **"A soldier covers nae mair of it"**—Robert Stevenson, *Kidnapped*.

CHAPTER 20

[38] **". . . watching his beloved brush her hair in the morning"**—a reference to Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*.

CHAPTER 23

[39] **Matun**—a reference to Kipling's *Truce with The Bear*.
[40] **"Thick-walled stone towers twenty to thirty feet high"**—this describes the dwellings of mountain men of the Caucauses and Scottish Highlanders.

CHAPTER 24

[41] **"A chain of fishes' voice and the sound of cats' steps"**—a reference to the Norse myth of Fenrir.
[42] **Firn**—a type of snow that has been left over from past winters and has been recrystallized into a substance that is an intermediate stage between snow and glacial ice.

CHAPTER 25

[43] **Mashtang**—the author's term.
[44] **Greengo**—a riff on 'greenhorn' and 'gringo'; original text uses American Indian term 'chechako' popularized by Jack London. It was replaced due to perceived low awareness of Jack London's works.

[45] **Gibberish**—the actual name for the direct substitution coding method; the current meaning of ‘nonsense’ developed later.

CHAPTER 27

[46] **Nin’yokve**—the author’s term, a phonetic meld of Japanese ‘ninja’ and Latin ‘que’ (that, which).
[47] **Hadaka-jime**—an actual term for one of ju-jitsu strangleholds, the rear naked choke.

CHAPTER 32

[48] **Fasimba**—a character in Harry Harrison’s *Deathworld 2* (ironically, a slaver). That character trades pleasantries with another: “Hate you, Ch’aka!” “Hate you, Fasimba!” This is meant to hint that the first Emperor of Harad is modeled on Chaka-Zulu.

CHAPTER 32

[49] **Umglangan**—a reference to Umglangani, King of the Zulu during the Boer wars.

PART III

[50] **“He was a self-made counter-terrorist”**—John LeCarre, *Little Drummer Girl*.

CHAPTER 36

[51] **Rostrum**—the ram bow of a naval ship.
[52] **Smoked beer**—an actual brewer term, the German Raushbier.

CHAPTER 37

[53] **“. . . to get rid of a caravan trade competitor for good”**—a reference to the Fourth Crusade, in which Venice succeeded in siccing the Crusaders on Constantinople rather than Palestine, becoming the dominant trade power in the Mediterranian after Bysantium’s demise.

CHAPTER 38

[54] **Umbarian fire**—a reference to the 'Greek fire' of Bysantium.
[55] **"Gentlemen don't read each others' mail"**—the words with which General Robert E. Lee supposedly refused to read the materials collected by Confederate intelligence.

CHAPTER 40

[56] **'Zamorro'**—a reference to Neapolitanian *camorro* that sounds like the famous soccer player Bobby Zamora.
[57] **'Umberto'**—a deliberate play-of-words reference: Umbar/ omerta/Umberto Eco.
[58] **The names of Umbarian citizens are meant to convey the melting-pot character of Umbar by sounding derived from various Mediterranean and nearby cultures. *E.g.*, Almandin sounds Arabic (a garnet-like mineral), Makarioni—Italian/ Russian (*macaroni*/Admiral Makarov), Carnero is Spanish ('fish'), Yakudze**—Georgian (the original uses Jacuzzi, which I replaced due to reader comments on its ingrained brand image).

CHAPTER 41

[59] **'Skuas'**—a kleptoparasitic species of seabird.
[60] **'Rosette'**—the closest slang equivalents I was able to find for this weapon (improvised out of a broken bottle) were "tulip" and "nigger knife"; the former appears unpopular while the latter would not have fit the milieu.

CHAPTER 42

[61] **Vaddari**—this name derives from *wazari* , a judo term for a good move that nevertheless did not result in a clear win (earns half a point).
[62] **"The winner is always right"**—this was the formula with which Empress Catherine the Great released General Alexander Suvorov from court martial. The general's crime was a swift capture of the Turkish fortress Turtukai despite the orders of his indecisive superior, Field Marshal Rumyantzev.

CHAPTER 43

[63] **Hakimians (adherents of Hakima)**—the name of this invented religion derives from Louis Borges' "Hakim of Merva, the masked painter."

CHAPTER 44

[64] **The story of pro-Elvish underground** in Umbar is intended to evoke the history of the Communist International in Europe and the USA of the 1920's and '30's.

CHAPTER 46

[65] **Vivino**—a fictional bird.

CHAPTER 47

[66] **"The magic phrase 'there's such a thing as necessity' "**—this turn of phrase was a Soviet propaganda favorite.

CHAPTER 48

[67] **Iguatalpa, Uraupan, etc.**—these are actual names of places in mountainous areas of Mexico.

[68] **Hachipuri (Georgian)**—cheese-filled bread pockets.

[69] **Basturma (Armenian)**—raw-smoked meat.

[70] **Pifos (Greek)**—a large ceramic jug. Some are large enough to admit a man (compare the finale of the tale of Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves). The opening process described is still in use in western Georgia.

CHAPTER 50

[71] **Ash-Sharam**—an invented name.

[72] **Mangal (Turkish)**—an outdoor wood-fired grill or a barbecue prepared on one.

[73] **Caravan-bashi (Turkish)**—leader of a caravan.

[74] **Lagman (Uzbek)**—a kind of Asian spaghetti.

CHAPTER 54

[75] **Ulshitan**—a derivative of sumpitan, the blow tubes used by Dayaks

[76] **Anchar**—a mythical super-poisonous tree of Oriental legend. The paralytic action described is that of the curare poison.

PART IV

[77] **"Make ye no truce with Adam-zad"**—Ridyard Kipling, *Truce with The Bear.*

CHAPTER 56

[78] **Ichiga (Siberian Russian)**—a soft-soled tall boot for swampy forests.

[79] **Ponyaga (Siberian Russian)**—an actual load-carrying device.

[80] **Kumiss (Mongolian)**—a mildly alcoholic drink made from horse milk.

CHAPTER 57

[81] **Grizzly**—the name of Dol Guldur's commandant was chosen to echo that of General Groves, head of the Manhattan Project.

[82] **Fire jelly**—an actual Molotov cocktail recipe.

[83] **Weapon of Vengeance**—a mythical super-weapon trumpeted by Nazi propaganda during the last year of WWII.

CHAPTER 58

[84] **"An honest division of labor: clean hands for the mastermind, clean conscience for the executor"**—a quote from a book by Viktor Suvorov, a former Soviet spy.

CHAPTER 60

[85] **The description of Lórien** is intended to echo the style of Orwell's *1984* and portray a totalitarian society.

[86] **"Never as united as now"**—a Soviet propaganda cliché.

[87] **"This is a great mystery"** – *Ephesians 5:32* ; intended to hint at

something both secret and dangerous to know.
[88] **“Experts who had tried, year after year, to divine the internal politics of a certain powerful and enigmatic state”**—a dig at the Western Sovietologists who had regularly failed spectacularly in their attempts to predict Soviet policy, and especially at the mythical struggle between the “hawks” and the “doves” in the Politburo they have theorized.

CHAPTER 63

[89] **Sponge steel**—the author’s invention.

CHAPTER 64

[90] **“Donkeys and scientists to the middle”**—during the Egyptian campaign, Napoleon Bonaparte traveled with a large group of scientists in his train, from which he formed the Institut de L’Égypte. The command “*Forméz les carrés, les anes et les savants au centre*” was reportedly sounded before every battle, most famously before the Battle of the Pyramids on 7/21/1798.

CHAPTER 65

[91] **“Idiot of the shining helmet”**—a reference to Hector’s description in Homer’s *Iliad*.

CHAPTER 67

[92] **Vakalabath’s prophecy**—the author’s invention.

CHAPTER 69

[93] **The scene at Orodruin** , including Tzerlag’s loss of fingers, is a paraphrase of Frodo’s final test in *The Lord of the Rings*.
[94] **Kurum (Siberian Russian)**—a boulder scree.

EPILOGUE

[95] **The format of this chapter** , written from the standpoint of an

imaginary modern Gondorian revisionist historian, is intended to cast the entire work as an alternative history written in the real Arda, where *The Lord of the Rings* is the accepted "mainstream" version of actual historical events. See Appendix II for more details.

[96] **"What will History say?"**—Bernard Shaw, *The Devil's Apprentice*

[97] **"Dare to err and to dream"**—"*Wage du zu irren und zu traumen*," Friedrich Schiller, *Thekla*

[98] **"Objective reality perceived by our senses"**—a Marxist definition of matter.

[99] **"Operation Sirocco . . . destroyed the entire Gondorian invasion fleet right at the piers"**—a reference to Sir Walter Raleigh's raid on the Second Spanish Armada at Cadiz.

[100] **"Let justice be done though the heavens fall!"**—the Anglicized version of Friedrich I's "*pereat mundus et fiat justitia*."

[101] **". . . the scale of terror had been greatly magnified by the nobility's historians"**—a dig at official historians, who had changed the estimates of the number of victims of Ivan the Terrible, Richard the IIIrd, the French Revolution, etc. many times to conform to official propaganda.

[102] **Grager of Aran**—a clear and unambiguous reference to Lawrence of Arabia.

[103] **Priestess Svantatra**—the author's joke; Svantatra was the name of a right-wing party in India of the 1960's.

[104] **The story of Éomer's conversion** echoes both the story of the sudden conversion of several Viking konungs to Christianity in order to rule Russia's northern tibes, and the official story of Prince Vladimir the Baptist, who supposedly chose a monotheistic faith to convert his country to after an open debate in Kiev between the preachers of Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Islam.

[105] **The War of Nine Castles**—a cross between the War of the Roses and the Battle of the Golden Spurs (fought at Courtraj on 7/11/1302 between a Flemish militia and a French mounted expeditionary force, being the first battle in which infantry vanquished armored knights).

[106] **"the faithful Hakimians . . . the schismatics"**—this mix of Islamic and Greek religious terms is yet another deliberate attempt to prevent a too-firm identification of any entity described in the book with any real-world one.

APPENDIX II

Why I wrote an apocryphal treatment of *The Lord of the Rings*

An essay by Kirill Yeskov for the *Semechki* fanzine, 2000

First, a few words about myself. I'm not a writer either in form (no literary memberships; royalties are a negligible share of my income) or in substance (writing fiction is not my only or even main occupation). I'm a senior researcher at the Paleontological Institute of the Academy of Sciences—the very place where Yefremov used to work; professionally I'm known as the author of almost a hundred works on the classification of Chelicerata and historical biogeography. In the last few years I have found it more interesting to deal with living children than with extinct arthropods—I teach electives in high school, summer and winter supplemental courses, etc. I wrote a couple of textbooks, got involved in creating a new natural history school curriculum; if I had to state a preference, it is precisely those activities that I consider my most important. I graduated from the Biology College of the Moscow University (a well-known nest of Voltairians) and have gained most of my life experience in expeditions through Siberia and Middle Asia; I'm an epicurean hedonist in my aspirations and a skeptical rationalist by conviction. Do you get the picture?

I'm saying this to explain that I wrote *The Last Ring-bearer* (like my previous novel, *The Gospel According to Afranius*) strictly for my own enjoyment and that of my friends; I can be termed a graphomaniac in that sense. A graphomaniac can be a good or a bad writer (there were some geniuses among them, like Griboedov and Lewis Carroll), but he never writes competitively—that is, to fit the tastes of a publisher or some average book-buying audience; he only writes for his own niche (whether it's some group or Alice Liddell is irrelevant).

The Last Ring-bearer was written for a very specific audience, too—it's just another "fairy tale for junior scientists" of which I am one. It is meant for skeptics and agnostics brought up on Hemingway and brothers Strugatzky, for whom Tolkien is only a charming, albeit slightly tedious, writer of children's books. Those were the people who got the biggest kick out of the novel; theirs were the reviews that used the expression "sleepless night," dear to any writer's heart, most often.

On the other hand, I can somewhat understand the feelings of "professional" Tolkien fans who foolishly parted with their money to buy this . . . this . . . whatever. This is not unlike some teenager, besotted with pirate fiction, tricked by the *Corsair* title into buying a book by a certain G. G. Byron, and then inveighing on the net: "Total baloney—loads of stupid love stories and not one decent boarding! The name must be there to trick the readers, otherwise who'd buy this crap!" Guys, please understand that this was not written for you! If you do grab something not meant for you—which ought to be obvious after reading about three paragraphs, *n'est-ce pas*?—then don't whine like an Arkansas bumpkin who got taken by *The Royal Nonesuch.*

However, the reaction of the upset Tolkien fans leads us to a really interesting problem regarding the propriety of utilizing secondary worlds created by one's demiurge predecessors. (Whether our own world is all that primary—whether Richard the IIIrd was an evil traitorous hunchback or Alexander of Neva a *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*—is another question that is well beyond the scope of this essay.) The founder of this literary tradition of playing with others' masks and backdrops is one Dio Chrysostomos, a Greek who lived during in the Roman Empire; dissecting Homer's text with the scalpel of irony, while strictly abiding by his "facts," he had rather convincingly proved that the Greek Achaeans had suffered a resounding defeat at the hands of the Greek Trojans and went home empty-handed, and that the rest was all pure PR, to use a modern term.

There are two ways of dealing with the foundation world. First, one can mechanically expand it in time or space, making a sequel. A sequel is by definition secondary and competitive, and I know of no sequels that are a more or less notable as literature (serial novels are another matter). Moreover, an author can't even write a decent sequel to his own text: I think we can agree that *Twenty Years After* vs. *The Three Musketeers* is like a woodcutter vs. a carpenter.

An apocryphal work—a different take on well-known events

(whether from the real or an imaginary world is irrelevant: who are we to judge which is derivative?)—is totally different. Naturally, the world of an apocryphal work turns out differently, bearing at best the same relation to the initial world as that of d'Artagnan and milady Winter does to real France under Louis the XIII . . . or is it vice-versa? Actually, upon contemplation, what difference does it make? What's important is that while the world of a sequel is a reproduction that adds absolutely nothing to the original, the worlds of the canonical and the apocryphal works can ideally make a "stereoscopic pair" that adds "depth" to the former. That is the field where all self-respecting authors have been playing ever since the aforementioned Dio, sometimes with quite decent results. (Interestingly, one can't write a sequel to one's own work, but one definitely can write a worthy apocrypha—take Stanislaw Lem's *Local Session*.)

This immediately creates a moral contradiction that's difficult to resolve. A view of any interest is only possible when one looks at a given world from an unusual ethical or aesthetical viewpoint, one that's most removed from that of its creator. Thus did Mark Twain, an orthodox adept of *liberte, egalite, fraternite*, plunge his Yankee into the idealistic knightly world, proving convincingly that all those Galahads and Merlins lied often and bathed seldom; thus did Sapkovsky gaily turn Wonderland into black horror, brewed, for good measure, from a clinical psychoanalysis of the relationship between Professor Dodgson and little Alice Liddell; thus did feminist Gloria Howard prove, from the viewpoint of Captain Ahab's wife, that the entire stupid hunt for the White Whale was but a game of a bunch of developmentally arrested guys, an apotheosis of male infantilism and lack of responsibility . . . The literary worth of the aforementioned works is beyond doubt, but whether it's ethical to so treat the source texts by Melville, Carroll, and the Arthurian legends is not obvious.

Nor is this an idle question. For example, I've read Yankee at King Arthur's Court prior to the legends themselves, and Mark Twain had forever poisoned my perception of this part of the global cultural heritage for me with his vitriol: "Now Sir Kay arose, and began to fire up on his history-mill with me for fuel. It was time for me to feel serious, and I did." (And brothers Strugatzky made it even worse with their "comrade Merlin" and "fair sir Melnichenko . . .") Honestly—cross my heart and hope to die—the last thing I want is to poison some teenager's future experience of Tolkien. Looking for a place for *The Last Ring-bearer* in the long row of literary apocrypha, I dare place

it next to my personal favorite *Rozenkrantz and Gildenstern Are Dead* (the movie, not the play). An exquisitely paradoxical post-modern game Tom Stoppard played against the Shakespearean backdrop is precisely the relationship with the source Text that I sought to accomplish. Whether I have succeeded is for readers to judge.

Now for the biggest question which I get asked constantly: "What was it about the world of *The Lord of the Rings* that had so attracted you, enough to make you want to write in it?" Briefly, I was attracted by a logical challenge to come up with a consistent explanation for several obvious contradictions in the image of Middle Earth that the Professor painted, demonstrating thereby that those contradictions are not real. Paradoxically, it was precisely the widely known "the Professor was wrong" thesis (which, thanks to the publisher's whim, graces the cover of the first edition of *The Last Ring-bearer*) that I sought to disprove.

"It appears to us that the chief motive and the main impulse of Tolkien's myth-making was the joy of creating a vast and consistent imaginary world, well developed in space and time. It is this joy of creation that undergirds Tolkien's ethical-religious concept of "co-creation," which likens the true Artist creating his own world to the Creator Himself. [. . .] Apparently, this writer has created the most complete "personal" mythology in the history of literature: an imaginary world with its own Book of Genesis, history, chronicles, geography, languages, etc. This painstakingly detailed imaginary universe has no close literary equivalent (emphasis mine)." (R.I. Kabakov, *Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and the Problem of Contemporary Literary Myth-making*.) In other words, the world the Professor had created turned out to be "real"; moreover, it is the only real one in the entire fantasy genre. Well, *noblesse oblige*.

It's unlikely that anyone will devote any serious effort to analyzing the ecosystem of a barren desert populated by train-sized predatory worms that eat excavators and sweat psychedelics: fantasy is fantasy. Not so the Middle Earth; the developed perfection of Tolkien's world quite impels one to conduct natural history studies of it, sometimes provocatively so. This invites another comparison, however strange at first blush, between Tolkien and Yefremov.

Perhaps you remember *The Hour of the Bull*—a sociological dissection of totalitarianism plus intriguing (albeit sometimes drawn-out) philosophical digressions on various topics. Besides all that, the book featured a very curious planet—with its axis of rotation in the

orbital plane (making for no seasons), eight continents grouped in four-link chains in the middle latitudes of either hemisphere (the combination of ocean currents that arises under such conditions makes for a very warm and even climate, like that of Earth's Mezozoic). And if we observe the existence of ancient giant trees (much like mallorns), then you can be sure that the absence of strong winds that would endanger such structures is implicit in the properties of atmospheric circulation in the planet's trade wind belts in this type of climate. It's noteworthy that Yefremov introduced all of those peculiarities of Tormans's physical geography only for that "real feel;" they are totally irrelevant to the literary goal of the book. It's just that Yefremov (a professional geologist who was awarded the USSR State Prize for his scientific, rather than literary, work) couldn't help but do a good job on these details.

Tolkien was a practicing scientist, too, but a linguist rather than a natural scientist like Yefremov, so the foundation of professional knowledge he had used to erect Middle Earth was different. It is fairly obvious to me that the Game the Oxford professor decided to play with nature began, in essence, with the creation of imaginary languages, with their own alphabets and grammar. Then he created the epic tales to match those languages, then the peoples who wrote those tales, and only then the steppes, mountains, and forests for those people to pasture their herds, build citadels, and battle the "Dark from the East." This, precisely, was the sequence: "In the beginning was the Word"—Ainur's music, pure and simple. Truly an excellent model of the Act of Creation!

However, Tolkien the philologist had obviously had a very weak interest in this last, non-living component of Middle Earth—its physical geography—and created it only because he had to, with predictable results. It is a well-known fact that the Professor had painstakingly verified, to the day, the lunar phases during his heroes' long quest. I believe that, but the problem is that he had overlooked some much more significant elements of the local natural history background.

The Middle Earth has several built-in physical defects, and there's no getting away from that. In his well-known essay *Must Fantasy Be Stupid?* Pereslegin provides a detailed classification of errors commonly committed by fantasy authors. He uses Tolkien's work as an example of one of them, an "irreversible professional error": "It occurs in a geologically unstable world. Tolkien, being a professor of

English Literature, knew nothing of plate tectonics, while the topography of Beleriand and Eriador are highly important to the story; therefore, it seems impossible to fix the author's mistake."

(To explain: if a planet has a single continent—Middle Earth—it means that the convection currents in the planet's mantle form a single cell, meaning that the entire "light" part of the continental crust has gathered over the point where the mantle material sinks toward the core, like foam gathers over the bathtub drain. (This had happened on Earth at least twice, in mid-Proterozoic and late Paleozoic, which is when two super-continents of Megagea and Pangea formed.) When subcontinents collide, they bunch up into folds (e.g., the Himalayas that arose at the collision of the Indian subcontinent with the Eurasian plate). This means that there ought to be a huge mountain plateau like Tibet smack in the center of Middle Earth; where is it?

Pay attention, now—strictly speaking, such errors are trifles. In Pereslegin's litany of sins an "irreversible professional error" is classified under tolerable errors, being one of the minor ones. It's obvious that one person can't be equally proficient in linguistics and geology (I suspect that Yefremov had committed no fewer errors creating Tormansian languages than Tolkien had in Middle Earth tectonics). So we can pardon the Professor—the infraction he had committed was not particularly dangerous to society; *The Lord of the Rings* can go free. This will acknowledge it to be a regular fantasy text —I mean, a real good one, easily in the top five . . .

Do you like this option? Me neither. Because *The Lord of the Rings* is not a good, or even the best, fantasy text. It is *sui generis*, the only one of its kind; therefore, we will not settle for anything less than a full exoneration.

We will assume that Middle Earth is as real as our world, so if some of the details do not fit our concepts, it's our problem. On the other hand, we will adhere scrupulously to the laws of nature. As Tolkien himself wrote, it's easy to imagine a green sun, but "To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft." Well, the sun has its usual color in Middle Earth (and probably belongs to G-2 spectral class), its surface gravity and geochemistry do not seem different from ours, and even the lunar month is 28 days. Therefore we have to approach the task wielding Occam's Razor (as is

customary to the European intellectual tradition): we will appeal to magic and suchlike only when out of all other options.

It turns out that all the seeming contradictions of Middle Earth's natural history can be resolved with a single assumption: that Tolkien is describing only the northwestern part of the local landmass, rather than the whole thing. Actually, it's not even an assumption: Tolkien's map is obviously intentionally cut off in the south and the east; why should we assume that his world ends there? There's enough room there for the hypothetical central plateau or even other continents and archipelagos.

If Middle Earth is as real as our world, it must be as infinitely varied. It must have a myriad of aspects that Tolkien had not covered as not worthy of his attention. For example, any mention of economics is as missing from his romantic world as sex was supposedly missing in the USSR—but how likely is one to find any such mundane matters in the knightly romances of our world? It seems quite justified to me to assume that the Middle Earth population, aside from battling the Dark Lord and his minions, also plowed, reaped, traded, robbed, etc. The heroic hobbits on their quest did not subsist only on herbs, rabbits, and Elvish breads—they also drank beer in taverns, and one has to pay for beer. (I mean, one doesn't have to, really, but that would make for a criminal rather than a knightly novel.) Trick question: what coin did they use? Right—the Professor made no mention of that.

This question regarding Middle Earth currency (which I have often used to stump Tolkien experts) has served as the departure point for a whole series of conclusions. Take Rohan, for example: what was its population's occupation? "The best horses in Middle Earth" are all nice and fine, but horse-breeding can in no way be the mainstay of an economy. Or take the Dark Lord's countless hordes: what did they eat in the desert of Mordor—jackrabbits? We've all read Lev Gumilev and have some idea about the logistics of expansion. In general, how can there be a capital city smack in the middle of a desert? That just doesn't happen . . . but actually, it does happen! Cities in the desert—that's the perished city civilizations of Sahelian Africa. Once the "Atlantic optimum" was over, Sahara began encroaching on the savannah, and that was the end of them. Actually, sorry—this isn't *The Lord of the Rings* any more, but rather *The Last Ring-bearer*!

And if the world of Middle Earth is real, then so are its people. If all those Aragorns and Faramirs are not "dramatis personae" but real

people who figure in the epochal tales of the North-western peoples (which tales Professor Tolkien had then collected and adapted), then there can be a variety of opinions concerning their deeds. This is something we're quite familiar with in our own world: in alternative opinions Richard the IIIrd comes out a most noble man who had paid for his nobleness with both his crown and his head, plus posthumous reputation to boot, whereas Joanne of Arc turns out to have been a sadistic psychopath who belonged on that pyre like few others . . . Plus Middle Earth surely has PR and info wars (how else?); perhaps it even has its own Professor Fomenko to claim, in all seriousness, that there was no Second Age, Angbad is nothing but Mordor, and Fingon, Isildur and Aragorn were the same person . . .

However, a diversity of opinions doesn't mean that those opinions lack clarity; quite the contrary. I see fantasy as a genre with very strict rules (only the classical "closed" detective story has stricter ones). Among those rules (such as medieval space-time structure of the world and medieval structure of the spiritual world, meaning a conflict of Absolute Good with Absolute Evil) Pereslegin lists this one: "A consistent romantic ethic—a romantic attitude of the author, the characters, and the readers toward war, love, heroism, and death." It follows inexorably that the characters have to be classified as "good guys" and "bad guys"—it is precisely this "black-white" contrast that makes fantasy so appealing to teenagers. In other words, the very canon of fantasy forbids moral relativism—sort of like having a classical tragedy in more than one place or having the detective be the murderer in a classic detective story.

Tolkien adheres to this rule perfectly, which is why for many readers, especially older ones, *The Lord of the Rings* has forever remained a kind of an American action movie—a bunch of good guys goes on a quest to wipe out a bunch of bad guys, who are bad if only because they are on the other side. In reality it's not quite so, and possibly not so at all, but this view is very common. So when it was time to set up the pieces in *The Last Ring-bearer*, I have decided that although I have to have "black" and "white" (as per the canon), at least I would draw the boundary between them in a line somewhat more meandering than the Anduin—more like it usually lies in real life.

And another thing. The romantic tradition does not presuppose that every bad guy be a priori treated as a fiend from Hell, which is what Tolkien consistently practiced. Even if we kill each other at the walls

of Dechaud, does it follow that Comte de Rochefort is any less noble than Athos? Not to mention that the Sheriff of Nottingham counts Richard at the Lee among his men, while there are future risaldars among the Afghan bandits of Kamal. Recall Kipling's famous:

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!

Tolkien clearly prefers the first two lines, while I go for the last two, even though both are unadulterated 24K romanticism . . .

In conclusion, a few words about my personal take on the Professor. It is of a dual nature: I bow before Demiurge Tolkien who had created an amazing Universe, but am rather cool toward Tolkien the Storyteller, author of the tale of four Hobbits and their quest. In other words, to me the theatrical backdrop is way more majestic and interesting than the play itself. Terry Pratchett said it well: "Tolkien's mountains have more personality than characters." So I'll bet that mine is far from the last Game that will be played in the Professor's world. *Rozenkrantz and Gildenstern Are Dead*—long live Rozenkrantz and Gildenstern!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kirill Yuryevich Eskov was born on September 16, 1956 in Moscow (Soviet Union) and is primarily a Russian writer, biologist and paleontologist.

Eskov graduated from the Department of Biology of Moscow State University in 1979.

In 1986 he defended a dissertation for the Candidate of Biological Sciences at the A.N.Severtsov Institute of Animal Evolutionary Morphology and Ecology of the USSR Academy of Sciences, the theme being "Spiders of Northern Siberia (horology analysis)" His main scientific interests as a biologist are the spiders of Siberia and the Russian Far East and, as a paleontologist, the Paleozoic and Cenozoic eras.

As of 2008 he is the Senior Researcher at the Laboratory of Arthropods of the Paleontological Institute of Russian Academy of Sciences and vice-president of the Eurasian Arachnological Society. He has worked at the institute since 1988.

As of 2002 he had 86 scientific publications.

Eskov discovered several new genera of spiders. Among seven discovered by him in 1988 is *Kikimora palustris* Eskov, 1988. It belongs to the Linyphiidae family, is found in Russia and Finland, and the name translates from Latin as "marsh Kikimora". Kikimora is a female spirit in Slavic mythology and is well-known in Russian common language.

He is also the author of the book "History of the Earth and its Life Forms", intended as a cutting edge biology textbook for high schools.

As a fiction writer he published several books, one of the most famous being *The Last Ringbearer* ,an alternative retelling of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, as told from the point of view of Sauron's forces, based on the proverb: "History is written by the victors. The book was "published to acclaim" in his homeland in 1999. Translations of the book have also appeared in other European

nations, but fear of the vigilant and litigious Tolkien estate has heretofore prevented its publication in English."

In late 2010, however, an English translation approved by Eskov was posted on LiveJournal Critics have called *The Last Ringbearer* "a well-written, energetic adventure yarn that offers an intriguing gloss on what some critics have described as the overly simplistic morality of Tolkien's masterpiece."

In October 2010, "*The Last Ringbearer*" was translated into English, and made available under a non-commercial license.

Among his other books is *The Gospel of Aphranius* (Russian: Евангелие от Афрания), a dramatic portrayal of Jesus. In the novel he attempts to construct a demythologised account of the events of the Gospels.